

FOLLOW-UP REPORT

For the period of 2019-2021

**Of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement
On ENQA Recommendations**



Tbilisi, 18th of March, 2021

List of Abbreviations

AQAS	Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs
BFUG	Bologna Follow-up Group
EKKA	Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
EU	European Union
EWMI	East-West Management Institute
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
HERE	Higher Education Reform Experts
LEPL	Legal Entity of Public Law
MoESCS	Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport
NCEA	National Center for Educational Accreditation
NCEQE	National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PLA	Peer Learning Activity
QA	Quality assurance
T&L	Teaching and learning
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFME	World Federation for Medical Education

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Recommendations of the ENQA and actions taken by the NCEQE.....	4
ESG 3.1: Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance	4
ENQA panel recommendations.....	4
ESG 3.3: Independence	8
ENQA panel recommendations.....	8
ESG 3.4: Thematic Analysis	9
ENQA panel recommendations.....	9
ESG 2.2: Designing methodologies fit for purpose	11
ENQA panel recommendations.....	11
ESG 2.3: Implementing processes.....	13
ENQA panel recommendations.....	13
ESG 2.4: Peer review Experts	15
ENQA panel recommendations.....	15
ESG 2.5: Criteria for Outcomes	16
ENQA panel recommendations.....	16
ESG 2.7: Complaints and appeals	17
ENQA panel recommendations.....	17
Key References	18

Introduction

The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) is the national educational quality assurance body established in Georgia by the Law of Educational Quality Enhancement; it was established in 2006 as National Center for Educational Accreditation (NCEA). After the first round of the revision of the external quality assurance system, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) was established as a legal successor of the NCEA. The new Law on Educational Quality Enhancement established the NCEQE in 2010 as independent agency in its activities and operation, with its structure and responsibilities defined in the Charter. The NCEQE supports educational quality enhancement and promotes quality culture and management practices at higher education institutions in Georgia through its

external quality assurance mechanism and involvement in various projects aimed at improving the quality of higher education provision.

In 2018, the NCEQE underwent ENQA-coordinated external review. In April of 2019 the Board concluded that the NCEQE was in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG-2015). The Board also requested to receive a follow-up report within two years of its decision in which the NCEQE would address the panel's recommendations.

The table below represents the compliance of the NCEQE against ESG-2015 standards in 2018 in ENQA-coordinated review:

Fully Compliant	Substantially Compliant	Partially Compliant
3.2 Official status	3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance	3.3 Independence
3.5 Resources	3.4 Thematic analysis	
3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct	2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose	
3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies	2.3 Implementing processes	
2.1 Considerations of internal quality assurance	2.4 Peer-review experts	
2.6 Reporting	2.5 Criteria for outcomes	
	2.7 Complaints and appeals	

The NCEQE views compliance of quality assurance mechanisms with the ESG-2015 as means for gaining credibility, which means contributions to protecting students' interest and advancement of quality of higher education provision in Georgia.

The NCEQE also benefited from the staff mobility exchanges within the project of the BFUG Thematic Peer Group on QA that offered work placement and opportunity of learning from peers at QA agencies in European countries.

The NCEQE started taking actions to fulfill the recommendations given in ENQA external review report in 2019. This was followed by assembling the working group consisting of the NCEQE's staff and Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE) who also were the representatives of HEIs and brought external, as well as internal quality assurance perspectives to the working group. This group worked intensively and exchanged ideas with the experts from Estonia and Germany within the framework of the EU funded Twinning project on 'Strengthening capacities for quality assurance and governance of qualifications'.

The group working on the initiatives for fulfilling the recommendations of the ENQA panel proposed the necessary changes in respective laws and regulations that were presented to the Coordinating Council of the NCEQE, MoESCS, the representatives of the higher education institutions and with wide public during NCEQE's annual conference in 2021.

In this follow-up report the NCEQE presents how it has addressed recommendations from the ENQA Board and the review panel. We also present the reflection on issues based on the ESG-2015 that we consider are of particular importance and challenging for the NCEQE.

Recommendations of the ENQA and actions taken by the NCEQE

This part describes the recommendations made by the ENQA experts' panel, as well as actions taken by the NCEQE to fulfill these recommendations and provides reflection on remaining challenges and the ways of further improvement envisaged by the NCEQE.

ESG 3.1: Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

Compliance Evaluation: substantially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

The involvement of all stakeholder groups in the governance should be improved, in particular since the Coordinating Council is not yet instituted and will not have a decision-making role. A student should be imperatively included in the Coordinating Council and efforts should be made to fill current vacancies.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken by the NCEQE

In 2018 the Coordinating Council was not yet operational. Majority of its members were the rectors of the higher education institutions in Georgia and there was no student representative involved in the composition of the Coordinating Council. In 2019 and 2020 the Coordinating Council functioned as an advisory body of the NCEQE contributing to the management and seeking to ensure the best interest of stakeholders in management decisions. However, the council's managerial role was limited in the governance of the NCEQE.

Reflection on the Council's work as an advisory body

The Coordinating Council became operational in 2019. On February 28, 2019 the student representative in the Council was appointed by the MoESCS following the nomination by the NCEQE (Minister N234 Decree). Since 2019, two [meetings of the Coordinating Council were conducted](#) In July 8, 2020 the Minister of MoESCS was replaced by the Deputy Minister in the Coordinating Council.

During the first meeting (05.06.2019) NCEQE presented ENQA review recommendations and further steps for fulfilling these recommendations to the Council members. The Coordinating Council also discussed functions and appropriateness of the Council composition. It was noted that while initially the Council would be having advisory function, it would gradually acquire increased role in decision-making that would be improving stakeholders' involvement in agency's management. The Coordinating Council also discussed the composition of the Board and the ways of its improvement. It was highlighted that for decreasing the risk of interest of conflicts it would be appropriate to avoid involvement of university rectors and individuals holding top-management positions in the composition of the Council. The members of the Coordinating Council noted that it would be more appropriate if the NCEQE would consider involving individuals in the Coordinating Council having experience in setting strategies and priorities in higher education internationally.

The second meeting with the Coordinating Council took place on October 26, 2020. During this meeting the NCEQE presented outcomes of the five-year strategic cycle to Council and seek feedback from them on its strategic goals and objectives for next five years (i.e. for 2021-2025). The NCEQE also presented

how it had addressed the ENQA panel recommendations. The strategic development, action plan and the NCEQE's report on fulfilling ENQA recommendations was accepted by the Council members. As suggested by the Coordinating Council, the piloting of the Cluster Accreditation was introduced in the Action Plan of the NCEQE for 2021.

Shifting the role of the Coordinating Council from advisory to managerial body

During 2019 and 2020 the NCEQE seek the ways of improving stakeholders' involvement in NCEQE's governance through the Coordinating Council. Particularly, NCEQE worked on shifting of the functions of the Coordinating Council as a managerial body. This topic was discussed in several meetings with the EU Twinning project experts, institutions, MoESCS and between the group members working on the initiatives to be taken for addressing the ENQA recommendations. As a result of these discussions, NCEQE initiated several [amendments in the Charter of the NCEQE](#). Students' involvement in work of the Coordinating Council became obligatory. According to the amendment in the NCEQE's Charter, the representatives of top management of educational institutions and public officials (Minister and Deputy Minister) cannot be appointed as members of the Coordinating Council. That decreases any possible risks of influence from the third parties on the members of the Coordinating Council.

Recent amendments of 2021 in the Charter of the Center set the number of the Council members, which consists of minimum 5 and maximum 13 members. The same person can be appointed as the member of the Coordinating Council only twice in a row. The members of the coordinating council are:

- Representatives of educational institutions (except of top management representatives)
- Representatives of the MoESCS (except of Minister and Deputy Minister)
- Students' representative
- Employers' representative
- Civil society (NGO) representative
- Representatives of international organizations working in education
- International experts and other persons whose knowledge and experience can be beneficial for the NCEQE's development for better serving the needs of public

Along with defining the composition of the Coordinating Council, qualification requirements have been determined for the members of the Coordinating Council as described below. The director of the Center selects the Council members according to these qualification requirements and presents to the Minister for final approval. The set qualifications requirements for the Council Members are the following:

For HEIs representatives:

- Doctoral degree or equivalent
- Minimum 5 years of experience in academia or in science
- Experience in higher education QA evidenced with the respective work experience or formal education

For Employers' representative:

- Master's degree or equivalent
- Holding managerial/leadership role

For Students' representative:

- Master's or Doctoral student considering that he/she is not in the final semester of studies

- Proof of academic excellence
- Knowledge of HE QA mechanisms evidenced by relevant work experience or formal education
- Experience in students-led and/or international educational activities and projects

For Civil Society (NGO) representatives working in education:

- Master's degree or equivalent
- Minimum 5 years of work experience in the third sector or in international organization
- Knowledge of HE QA mechanisms evidenced by relevant work experience or formal education

For international experts:

- Minimum 5 years of experience of working for ENQA member agency or experience in external QA procedures

Defining qualification requirements of the Coordinating Council members by the NCEQE ensures involvement of the members with appropriate experience and knowledge; it also ensures transparency of the selection procedure that decreases the risks of conflict of interest.

The amendment in the Charter of the NCEQE also set the new managerial functions of the Council, which significantly shifted the role of the Coordinating Council from advisory to the managerial body along with adding other significant functions to it. According to the amendments, without the consent of the Coordinating Council it will not be possible to:

- Develop, approve and amend the strategic development and action plans of the NCEQE;
- Revise standards and procedures of external QA mechanisms and propose the ways of their further enhancement;
- Amend the Charter of the NCEQE;
- Develop, approve and amend key internal regulations of the NCEQE;
- Develop and amend staffing policies and budget of the NCEQE;
- Revision external review outcomes of the NCEQE carried out by ENQA, EQAR, WFME;
- Develop opportunities for international collaboration and recommendations for internationalization of NCEQE's activities;
- Develop and approve internal QA procedures of the NCEQE; review outcomes of internal QA procedures of the NCEQE and develop recommendations for further improvement;
- Establish information security policy of the NCEQE.

The Coordinating Council participates in the selection of the Authorization / Accreditation and Appeals Councils' members. This change gives more ownership to the NCEQE in the selection of Council members which underscores managerial function and role of the Coordinating Council. To ensure effectiveness, integrity and transparency of the Council's activities, rules and principles of Council's work have been defined. The Council members in their decisions should be independent, impartial and secure confidentiality. Public access to the minutes of the Coordinating Council on the web-page of the NCEQE adds transparency to its activities.

Reflecting on the ENQA panel recommendation on the presence of the students' representative in the Authorization/accreditation Councils, in 2019 the NCEQE filled all vacancies in Councils with the student representatives. Further, the NCEQE is working on setting up a collaboration platform with students that will create additional means for feeding-in students' voice and expertise in activities of the NCEQE while promoting working with students as partners in higher education.

The NCEQE sees the above described amendments in the Charter as substantially enhancing the role of the Coordinating Council in the governance of the NCEQE, by transforming its role from advisory to the managerial. To ensure the continuous and efficient stakeholders' engagement in the NCEQE governance, the NCEQE is planning to extend the terms of office of the Coordinating Council from 2 to 5 years (i.e. for one strategic cycle).

The comparative table below describes differences in relation to the composition and functioning of the Coordinating Council in 2018 and in 2021:

Criteria for comparison	2018	2021
Purpose of forming the Coordinating Council	The Coordinating Council was an advisory body that was supposed to reflect interests of different stakeholders.	The Coordinating Council is a managerial body of the NCEQE for ensuring all stakeholders' involvement in management of the agency and improvement of QA mechanisms.
Functions	Detailed functions of the Coordinating Council were defined in general terms and were fewer in 2018. Scope of the Council's work was advisory.	According to the amendments, the Coordinating Council is charged for new functions that substantially increased the Council managerial role. Functions of the Council has been significantly increased and specified.
Composition	Rectors, Minister MoESCS Employers' representative.	Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Rectors and Vice rectors, Chancellors and Head of internal QA offices of HEIs cannot be appointed as members of the Coordinating Council. The composition of stakeholder groups in the governance of the NCEQE has been diversified and it includes: representatives of educational institutions, MoESCS, students, employers', civil society (NGO), representatives of international organizations working in education and international experts.
Required competencies	Required competencies of the Coordinating Council members were not defined.	The specific qualifications requirements have been defined for the particular group of stakeholders representing the educational institutions, employers, students, civil society and experts in the Coordinating Council
Code of ethics and Transparency of the work	Principles of work and code of ethics for Coordinating Council members was not defined. Minutes of the meeting were not required to be public.	Principles of work and code of ethics have been defined for the Coordinating Council members. Minutes of the meetings to be publicly available on the NCEQE's web-page.

ESG 3.3: Independence

Compliance Evaluation: partially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

It should be ensured that there is absolute independence from the government in that the Minister cannot dismiss director or council member without serious reasons, the circumstances of which should be more transparently defined beyond a mere “inappropriate manner”.

The panel also considered that the agency should take more ownership of how councils as decision-making bodies are nominated under the new Rules which give this power to the Ministry.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken by the NCEQE

Allocation of power and role of the MoESCS in appointing the Director and Councils was the major area of concern in terms of independence of the NCEQE in 2018.

In 2019-2020 the NCEQE took several actions to enhance organizational independence of the NCEQE. The Coordinating Council became operational in 2019. To decrease any possible risks of any kind of influence from the third parties over organizational independence of the agency, amendments were made in the Charter of the NCEQE: the function of the Council was shifted from the advisory to the managerial body. Students’ involvement in work of the Coordinating Council became obligatory, representatives of top management of educational institutions and public officials (Minister and Deputy Minister) cannot be appointed as members of the Coordinating Council. From July of 2020 the Minister is not in the composition of the Coordinating Council.

The rule of appointment and dismissal of the director of the NCEQE is defined by the [Law of Georgia on Legal Entities Under Public Law](#). According to this law, the Ministry is obliged to select the director of the LEPL through the public call which is published for the period of 10 days on the web page of the Civil Service Bureau (hr.gov.ge). The selecting committee nominates the selected candidate to the Minister, which appoints the director with the consent of the prime-minister. The same law provides the grounds for the dismissal of the Director of the NCEQE. The grounds for dismissal of the director are limited to the following reasons: termination of Georgian citizenship, court’s final judgment on conviction, being declared by the court as incapacitated, resignation, death, failing to exercise the powers defined by a law or charter of the entity in appropriate manner or for four consecutive months. Because the Minister has the power to appoint and dismiss the Director of the NCEQE, the appointment procedure is delegated to the selection committee. And the decision on dismissal of the director must be evidence-based and clearly stated. The director can appeal the decision in the court. In accordance with this law, the current Director of the NCEQE was appointed in 2019 from within the Agency personnel that leveraged the risk of skewing from the NCEQE’s vision and strategy. It is also worth mentioning that the current director of the NCEQE before her appointment had served at the NCEQE in a capacity of the Deputy Director during 2015-2019.

In 2020 the rule of selection of the members of the Authorization/Accreditation/Appeals Councils was amended. According to these changes the Director of the NCEQE assembles committee for selecting [council members](#) independently. The Committee assembled by the Director of the NCEQE in 2020 for selecting council members was composed of the representatives of the NCEQE, MoESCS, HEIs and other entities of MoESCS. The Director of the NCEQE was chairing the work of the selection committee. The NCEQE views this change as a step forward in increasing its ownership in the process of selecting the

council members who are nominated to the MoESCS and then sent to the Prime Minister for the final approval. Further, the NCEQE envisages to increase the role of the Coordinating Council in future in selecting the members of the councils that is guaranteed by the amendments made in the Charter of the NCEQE.

The recent changes in charters of authorization and accreditation enhanced the independence level of the councils' operations. Specifically, increasing the term of office of the members from 1 to 2 years and changing the open voting practice to closed voting ensure consistency of decision-making and independence of the council members from the stakeholders.

During 2019-2020 NCEQE revised the accreditation fees that enabled it to be less dependent on state funding. In 2018 the share of the state funding in the budget of the NCEQE was 58% while currently this share equals to 39%. The NCEQE continues to have self-sufficient fees for its services that provides the agency with adequate financial resources to ensure its operational independence.

In future the NCEQE, envisages to increase the role of the Coordinating Council in appointing and dismissing of the director of the NCEQE; it also plans to revise the composition and qualification criteria of the committee for selecting the members of the Authorisation / Accreditation / Appeals Council to ensure involvement of all stakeholder representatives in the selection committee.

ESG 3.4: Thematic Analysis

Compliance Evaluation: substantially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

The agency should make use of the Twinning project to establish a sustainable methodology for implementing systematic analysis, also beyond the lifetime of the project.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken

In 2018 and in previous years, the NCEQE had already conducted some thematic and system-wide analysis on external quality assurance mechanisms and results of piloted authorization and accreditations standards. The conducted analysis was published in the form of [annual reports](#) and was regularly shared with the stakeholders' during the NCEQE Annual Conference.

In 2019 the NCEQE conducted a [thematic analysis in close cooperation with and financial support of the Erasmus+ National Office of Georgia](#). Based on the Memorandum of Cooperation concluded between NCEQE and the Erasmus+ Georgia Office, an analysis of the introduction of updated mechanisms for the authorization of higher education institutions was conducted. Within the framework of the project, the main tendencies were identified and recommendations were developed for further improvement of the processes. The key findings of the research were presented to stakeholders at the [NCEQE annual conference in 2019](#). Additionally, the main findings of the study were applied by the NCEQE in revising charters of the Authorization and Accreditation. However, systematic approach of developing thematic analysis by the NCEQE to reflect on the findings of the external quality assurance activities was relatively new.

Systematic approach of developing thematic analysis

Reflecting on the ENQA recommendation, the NCEQE started working on the development of a sustainable methodology for implementing thematic analysis. In 2019 within the Twinning Project in

collaboration with the experts from the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) and the Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) the [methodology for implementing thematic analysis](#) was developed. The methodology for carrying out thematic analysis involves identifying significant topics emerging from external QA reviews, as well as topics that emerge as most problematic and pertaining high risks in terms of quality of higher education provision in Georgia at national and international levels. Currently, NCEQE carries out thematic analysis on all three levels of education on four topics by applying on the abovementioned methodology:

1. Quality Assurance of medical higher education;
2. Mechanisms for quality assurance of research activities and of doctoral degree programmes;
3. Assessment of the current situation, challenges and ways to improve the implementation of a foreign-recognized general education program in Georgia;
4. Analysis of changes in Georgia's VET study fields both content-wise and in terms of their compliance with the EQF;

Thematic analysis on QA of Medical higher education and Quality of Doctoral Education in Georgia aim at revealing the main challenges and improvement areas in the quality assurance mechanisms for evaluating quality of medical higher education and doctoral education in Georgia. The findings of the analysis will feed into revision of the Sectoral Benchmarks in Medicine in line with revised standards of medical education of WFME; the findings of the second thematic analysis will also be used for the development of guidelines for evaluating doctoral programmes and research activities in institutional evaluations. These will also feed in revising standards and guidelines for evaluating doctoral programmes in cluster accreditation. International experts from the Twinning project have been providing methodological support to the working group through conducted Twinning project expert missions.

In addition to the developed methodology and ongoing thematic analysis, the separate unit - Planning, Research, and International Relations Department was established within the NCEQE in 2020 ([Amendment in the Charter of the NCEQE/17th of July, 2020](#)). This department is in charge of coordinating work of the thematic analysis.

Additionally, with the spread of COVID-19 along with [providing guidance to institutions](#) the NCEQE sent the survey to HEIs and based on received data conducted analysis on [quality of online T&L](#). The need for this became apparent firstly, because output reports of external QA activities of the NCEQE had not covered quality of online T&L, secondly, HEIs in Georgia lacked the experience of online education provision. Further, with the support of East-West Management Institute and USAID, the NCEQE [announced a call](#) for international experts to elaborate on online/blended T&L criteria and guidelines, to orient institutions towards HE quality assurance and maintenance in the upcoming academic semesters. For this the project team relied on the [analysis report](#) developed by the NCEQE on online T&L in emergency mode and on findings of the focus groups with HEIs representatives, students, experts and NCEQE staff that were conducted. As a result, the [guidance](#) developed within the project set out the results of the discussion and information gathered from HEIs in Georgia in times of pandemic and offers recommendations at an overarching level and at the level of external QA standards of institutional evaluations. The [report](#) developed in the framework of the project also proposed some interim steps to be considered in relation to online/blended T&L in Georgia. The findings outlined in the report will be used for enhancing external QA standards of the NCEQE and will feed in the initiatives for supporting the quality of online higher education provision in Georgia in future. The NCEQE also plans to conduct analysis of programme accreditation reports in Law at systems level in collaboration with [EWMI/USAID](#).

ESG 2.2: Designing methodologies fit for purpose

Compliance evaluation: Substantially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

It is recommended to use the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

It is recommended to detail and specify how recognition of decisions or reviews by international agencies would function, for example with regard to establishing compatibility and implementing follow-up procedures.

NCEQE is recommended to provide more guidance to experts and the Authorization Council on how to analyse the standard dealing with determining students' quota.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken by the NCEQE

Use of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The legislative framework in Georgia allows HEIs to develop joint programmes by applying the European Approach for quality assurance of joint programmes

(https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf). This is ensured by the following:

- The Law of Georgia on higher education gives the definition of joint programmes and outlines the conditions for implementation of joint programmes. According to this definition, the joint programme can be implemented by several institutions within the country, as well as in cooperation with the institutions operating in different countries. In both cases it is mandatory to agree the conditions of the partnership agreement with the NCEQE. This step assists and guides the institutions to reflect on the joint character of the programme in advance. Further, according to the Law of Georgia on Educational Quality Enhancement, joint programmes accreditation may be carried out by a foreign organization with the relevant competence recognized by the NCEQE.
- [Order of the Director of the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement of Georgia #74 of 03.02.2017](#) "On Approval of the Rule on Agreeing with the LEPL National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement of the Partnership Agreement between the Implementing Institutions for the Implementation of Joint Higher Education Programs" serves as a primary informative step for the HEI in preparing for the development of the joint programme and for assessing joint character of programmes considering ESG-2015. It aims to guide institutions in reflection on features of jointness in the development of the programme and in making sure that the programme that institutions wish to develop do really have joint nature. The partnership agreement determines conditions that institutions should observe in the development and implementation of joint programmes to serve students' best interests and ensure quality of the programme. The conditions to be outlined in the partnership agreement reflect the standards and procedures of the European Approach. The Partnership Agreement is to be submitted by the HEI when applying for programme accreditation.

For enhancing the use of European Approach several actions were taken by the NCEQE:

- On January 29, 2020 the NCEQE initiated [addition of article 27⁷ in the Charter of Accreditation of joint programmes](#) that describes the procedure of the accreditation of joint programmes in more details. The article 17² was added to the Accreditation Charter on March 16, 2021 that states that the NCEQE applies European Approach for quality assurance of joint programmes. Further, [paragraph 5¹ of Article of the Accreditation Charter](#) states that in the process of accreditation of

international joint programmes, the accreditation expert panel shall include international expert/experts from respective country/countries in which the joint programme will be implemented that enhances the use European Approach by the NCEQE.

- In 2019 the NCEQE developed section in Experts Guidelines on assessment of joint programmes that reflects the distinguished features of joint programmes and the process of their evaluation for experts.
- To facilitate universities in development of joint programmes, change in the Law of Higher Education in 2019 was initiated that allows the institutions now to develop joint master programmes amounting to minimum 60 ECTS (for executive MBA programmes) and Bachelor's programmes amounting to 180-240 ECTS.

Recognition of decisions or reviews by international agencies

In 2018, there were no specific details given in the accreditation charter concerning the procedures and follow-up processes for recognition of decisions or reviews by international agencies. The NCEQE introduced [changes in the accreditation charter](#) and designed the detailed procedure for recognition of international accreditation. Furthermore, the NCEQE designed the terms and rules for making decision about the recognition, together with establishing relevant follow-up procedures.

Procedures of the recognition of the accreditation decision granted by the ENQA member agency and by other QA agencies/organizations became more detailed. The procedure clearly defines the list of requested documentation to be submitted to the [NCEQE by the institution for recognition of foreign accreditation](#). The new recognition mechanism involves the following improvements:

- If the HEI wishes to obtain accreditation from the agency which is not the member of the ENQA and is not operating on the territory of the EU, the HEI is now entitled to inform the NCEQE before contacting agency abroad. This gives the HEI the opportunity to ensure compliance of the QA agency/organization abroad and its QA mechanism with the national QA procedures, ESG-2015, and with the European Approach (if the HEI is going to accredit a joint programme)
- It has been made clear for the HEIs that accreditation carried out by the ENQA-member QA agencies operating in EU are recognized automatically. Accreditation of QA agencies in other countries involves assessment of the compliance of the QA standards and procedures against NCEQE standards and procedures of accreditation that is in line with ESG-2015
- The NCEQE has defined the length of the recognition procedure and follow-up procedures of international accreditation. The NCEQE carries out follow-up procedure only in case it receives a complaint from the student or the member of the academic/administrative staff of the programme accredited by QA agency/organization abroad. In this case, the NCEQE agrees in advance with the QA agency abroad and informs the HEI that it is going to carry out follow-up monitoring. The final report developed as a result of the follow-up monitoring is sent to the institution and the QA agency abroad
- It has been defined in the accreditation charter that HEIs have to inform the NCEQE on the results of follow-up procedures (if any) carried out by the QA agency abroad that will be considered by the NCEQE in the process of conducting thematic analysis (when required).

Guidance to experts and the Authorization Council on determining students' quota

According to the Authorization Charter, HEIs are expected to have in place methodology for defining students' quota that considers specifics of the study field and material and human resources of the institution.

The NCEQE developed instructions and guidelines for experts for evaluating effectiveness of the [methodology of students' quota planning by the institution](#). The developed guidelines provide instructions for the experts and the council members to draw attention to particular criteria for reasonable calculation of students' quota while respecting the autonomy of institutions. The NCEQE also introduced the section on identifying students' quota in the [handbook of the Authorization Council](#). These actions provide additional support for experts and council members to evaluate sufficiency of existing resources at the institution in relation to the numbers of current and prospective students. It is worth mentioning that since 2018 the NCEQE has not received any complaints from institutions regarding defining the students' quota.

To summarize, by the actions taken the NCEQE aimed at improvement of fitness to purpose of its methodologies. Firstly, the initiated changes in the accreditation charter enable the NCEQE to consider European Approach in the procedure for quality assurance of joint programmes. Secondly, the NCEQE has specified the details of recognition of international accreditation which provides clear information on the recognition procedure. Finally, the NCEQE provided more guidance to experts and the Authorization Council on how to analyze the standard dealing with determining students' quota.

ESG 2.3: Implementing processes

Compliance evaluation: Substantially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

NCEQE has to define the details of the different follow-up procedures.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken by the NCEQE

In 2018 follow-up procedures were described in general terms and lacked the details of the procedures. Follow-up procedures (one-year progress report, three-years progress report) were not defined in the charters and their implementation had not been launched in 2018. Terms, conditions and limits of planned and case-based follow-up procedures were not clearly defined.

The following actions were taken by the NCEQE to define the details of the different follow-up procedures:

- In January 2020 the Charter on Accreditation (Article 27⁶, paragraph 2¹-2¹¹) specified the procedure of assessing one-year reports for programme accreditation. According to the procedure, the expert from the respective field develops the final report on the progress report and both documents (one-year progress report prepared by the HEI and final report) are reviewed by the Accreditation Council. The Accreditation Charter also defined the types of decisions in relation to the one-year progress reports on programmes. During 2020 the Accreditation Council reviewed 104 one-year programme reports. Part of these reports were evaluated positively by

the Accreditation Council, while for others the Council took decision to carry out follow-up visit for the programme;

- In 2019 and 2020 the institutional one-year progress reports were sent to the Authorization Council for review. All the reports were evaluated positively by the Authorization Council. According to the changes initiated in the Authorization charter, the procedure for assessing institutional one-year progress reports has been defined and from 2021 on, these reports will be assessed by the group of experts and then reviewed by the Authorization Council; the Authorization Council will either accept one-year progress report or will request the NCEQE to carry out monitoring visit in 2 years' period ([Amendments in Authorization Charter](#));
- As a result of recent amendments in Authorization/Accreditation charters the details of the procedure for evaluating three-years progress reports for programmes and institutions were defined. Respective, terms have been determined and templates for this type of follow-up have been developed. These reports will be evaluated by experts' teams and the feedback will be communicated to HEI and the NCEQE. Through three-years progress report procedure the NCEQE seek to enhance the developmental function of the follow-up procedures. Namely, this was done by outcomes of this type of follow-up procedure facilitating:
 - self-reflection by the institution in interim period on strengths and areas of development
 - institutionalization and internalization of robust QA mechanisms at the HEI
 - the NCEQE in identifying the strengths and areas of development in interim period, on micro and macro levels (at institutional level and systems level) through thematic analysis. The outcomes of this thematic analysis will feed into planning provision of needs-based supportive measures for institutions by the NCEQE.
- Reflecting on the ENQA recommendation to avoid overburdening of institutions in follow-up procedures, the NCEQE identified the cases in which HEIs will not have to present interim three-years self-evaluation report, e.g. HEIs which will have undergone any type of follow-up after granting authorization, will not be required to submit the interim three-years report ([Amendments in Authorization Charter](#)). Additionally, the terms for presenting the interim self-evaluation report was determined by the NCEQE's director's decree. These terms are July 1 – July 31 of the third year after granting authorization and programme accreditation.
- The Accreditation and Authorization Charters defined in details for conducting basis and procedures for planned and case-based follow-up procedures. Namely, differences between planned and case-based monitoring were defined (Article 88, in Authorization Charter; Article 31, in Accreditation charter). According to these changes the NCEQE is obliged to annually inform respective HEIs on the upcoming planned monitoring and on the criteria based on which the monitoring will be carried out
- It has been specified in Accreditation and Authorization Charters that case-based monitoring will be conducted based on the complaints received from the students, members of the staff or other stakeholders; the complaint can be made in relation to possible violation of accreditation and/or authorization standards by the institution. The NCEQE has developed [procedure for reviewing these types of complaints](#). This provides better guidance to the students and other stakeholders to raise concerns at the NCEQE in relation to quality of education provision at HEIs in Georgia
- In the Charters approaches of assembling experts panels for follow-up procedures have been defined. These approaches depend on the scope and the type of monitoring.
- The NCEQE has also developed Handbook for Follow-up procedures for [programme](#) and [institutional](#) accreditation that provides more clarity and guidance to institutions, experts and Council members on the aims and procedure of each type of follow-up.

With the abovementioned actions the NCEQE seek to brought more clarity, guidance and transparency on the follow-up procedures, as well as create conditions to enhance development-oriented function of the follow-up procedures.

ESG 2.4. Peer review Experts

Compliance evaluation: Substantially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

The approach to the training of the experts should be revised, with a particular focus on more detailed, informative briefing for international experts, also available at a longer time ahead of the onsite visit, as well as on more systematic joint training of national and international experts.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken by the NCEQE

In 2018 the training for international experts was provided before the site visits and NCEQE was offering trainings on particular different topics considering the available funding from external sources.

During the 2019 and 2020, the NCEQE offered regular trainings to experts on QA standards and procedures and the revised National Qualifications Framework. It is worth mentioning, that in the period of 2019-2020 NCEQE organized 50 trainings for local experts, covering roughly 400 of them (due to global pandemic most of the trainings were delivered in online format in 2020). Additionally, the training module was developed specifically for student experts on QA standards and students' role in QA, in collaboration with European Students Union. This training aimed to enhance the skills and knowledge of student experts in relation to students' role in QA.

To support international experts in better understanding of the national context of Georgian education system, the NCEQE developed short videos in English on following topics:

- [Overview of the HE System in Georgia](#)
- [Experts' Code of Ethics and Rule of Conduct](#)
- [Sector benchmarks in medicine](#)
- [Authorization Standards](#)
- [Accreditation Standards](#)

In 2019 -2020 the NCEQE was conducting trainings for local and international experts before the site visits. In 2021, the NCEQE is [conducting joint trainings](#) for Georgian and international experts on abovementioned topics one month prior to the site visits. This approach combined with the short videos ensure that members of our expert pool are well briefed on the QA standards and procedures and the local context and start collaboration for the program/institution review.

In 2019, additionally, the experts' guidelines have been revised both for authorization and accreditation experts. The revision of the guidelines was based on input collected through the experts' surveys and actual experience. Background information on key national policy and regulatory documents on higher education programmes were provided in experts guidelines. The developed documents were shared with the experts' pool.

The NCEQE addressed ENQA suggestions ensuring involvement of the employer representatives consistently as members of accreditation expert groups. The number of the employers' representatives increased from 44 in 2018 to 110 in 2020. Another suggestion on widening the involvement of the

international experts was addressed by the NCEQE in the evaluation of the international joint programs according to the European Approach (See section on 2.2.). Further, the NCEQE envisages to involve international experts in cluster accreditation procedures from 2022. The international experts will be involved in piloting of cluster accreditation that will be carried out [within the EU Twinning project](#).

The NCEQE participates as a full or associated partner in international and national projects supporting implementation of EHEA reforms and development of capacities in higher education ([Integrity](#) - Academic Integrity for Quality Teaching and Learning in HEIs in Georgia, [PROFFORMANCE](#) – Assessment Tool and Incentive Systems for Developing Higher Education Teachers’ Performance). Supporting training of experts with experience gained through these projects adds value to the NCEQE’s participation in them. Furthermore, NCEQE participates as a partner in EU-funded project SQUARE aiming at improvement of the quality and the relevance of the third mission of HEIs. Participation in this project will allow the NCEQE to improve guidelines for experts in evaluating third mission activities of universities that is one of the criteria in authorization standards.

In 2019-2020, the NCEQE conducted systematic evaluation of the experts’ performance, the outcomes of the evaluation were presented and [discussed with the experts](#). This enabled the NCEQE to identify the areas of development in supporting work of experts. To further support and improve experts’ work, the NCEQE has started the collaboration with the Alumni Association of the International Education Center of Georgia within the framework of the [project EDU-LAB](#). The project will support the analysis of the current needs of the experts’ pool that will be followed by the PLA for the local and international experts.

ESG 2.5: Criteria for Outcomes

Compliance evaluation: Substantially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

NCEQE should assess whether the terms of office, working methodology and voting methodology of the Authorization and the Accreditation Councils contribute to systematically ensuring consistency.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken by the NCEQE

In 2018 the members of the Councils were appointed for one year. The voting was taking place behind closed doors but sometimes during public Council meetings it was possible to learn which Council member voted in which way (due to the Chair requesting to vote again in presence of the other attendees after the decision was made behind closed doors).

In 2020 the NCEQE initiated changes in Authorization Charter, according to which the term of office of Authorization Council members, invited Authorization Council and Appeals Council will be 2 years. The term of office of members of the Accreditation Council will remain one year since the NCEQE is planning to shift to cluster accreditation of programmes from 2022. In this system the programmes of one field will be evaluated each year. NCEQE has also developed the Handbook for Council members that provides methodological guidance to the members of the Council. In this way, the NCEQE assumes that these initiatives will facilitate consistency and continuation of Council’s work.

The rule of voting has also been changed, namely, it will not be possible for the HEI representatives and other attendees of the meeting to identify what each member voted for during public meetings of the Council. The NCEQE defined more specifically the conflict of interest criteria. More specifically, it established that the members of the council who represent the institution whose

accreditation/institutional evaluation is being discussed by the council, these members will not participate in the discussion on behalf of the institutions they represent. The NCEQE sees this change as contributing to enhancement of level of independence and increase objectivity and impartiality in decision-making.

The NCEQE plans to continue working on the composition of the Councils and on supporting effectiveness of its work. Specifically, the NCEQE aims to specify the number of terms of office that Council members can serve and considers introduction of evaluation system of the Council members' work.

ESG 2.7: Complaints and appeals

Compliance evaluation: Substantially compliant

ENQA panel recommendations

NCEQE should make the process for complaints, i.e. dissatisfaction about the conduct of the authorization or accreditation process or the experts or staff members involved, accessible, understandable and transparent for all stakeholders.

Conditions in 2018 and actions taken by the NCEQE

In 2018 Information on complaints procedure lacked transparency and accessibility that was partly caused by the similarity of translation of "complaints" and "appeals" in Georgian. The procedure of handling the complaints was not described in details and it was understood as a part of the disciplinary procedure.

In the beginning of 2020 the NCEQE described the complaints procedure clearly and made it available on the NCEQE's [web-site](#). By complaints procedure the NCEQE tries to provide the best possible service to institutions and to public in general and to work in an open and accountable way. The NCEQE accepts two types of complaints: complaints from the higher education institutions on dissatisfaction about the conduct of external QA procedures by the NCEQE and complaints of students/staff members/other stakeholders against the higher education institutions authorized by the NCEQE. Complaints procedure guarantees confidentiality and anonymity where necessary and through it the NCEQE tries to find resolution for the issues outlined in complaints. Procedure of both types of complaints and respective forms are now available on the NCEQE's [web-page](#). The NCEQE made efforts to increase the levels of openness, accessibility, transparency and equality of opportunities through complaints that is illustrated by increased number of complaints received by the NCEQE compared to previous years. Further, the NCEQE is planning to analyse the information provided through the complaints (particularly of those submitted by students/university staff/other stakeholders) in thematic analysis where applicable.

The NCEQE initiated amendments in the Accreditation and Authorization charters for providing detailed description of [complaints procedure](#). The institution can submit a complaint in relation to the external QA procedure caused by the violation of the Authorization or Accreditation Charter by the experts or the NCEQE staff. The complaint can also be submitted in relation to experts rule and code of conduct by experts. The same applies to the NCEQE staff in case of violation of internal regulation ([Amendments in Accreditation Charter](#); [Amendments in Authorization Charter](#)). Revised complaints procedure enables the NCEQE to achieve greater level of openness to the improvement of procedures, equality of opportunity for institutions and transparency in the work of the Agency.

Key References

[NCEQE Charter](#)

[Rule on the Selection of the Candidates for Membership of the Authorization Council of the General, Vocational, Higher Education Institutions, the Accreditation Council for the Educational Programmes, and the Appeals Council](#)

[Coordinating Council Session Minutes N1 \(2019\)](#)

[Coordinating Council Session Minutes N1 \(2020\)](#)

[Law of Georgia on Educational Quality Enhancement](#)

[Authorization and Accreditation Charters](#)

[Amendments in Authorization Charter](#)

[Amendments in Accreditation Charter](#)

[Law of Georgia on Legal Entities under Public Law](#)

[Guidance for Experts on evaluating HEIs methodologies for defining students' quotas](#)

[Handbook for Council members](#)

[Guidelines for Accreditation Experts](#)

[Guidelines for Authorization Experts](#)

[Methodology for implementing Thematic Analysis](#)

[Order of the Director of the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement of Georgia for the Implementation of Joint Higher Education Programmes](#)