



# **National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE)**

**Self-Assessment Report (SAR) for the External Review against the  
Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European  
Higher Education Area (ESG)**

**2023**

## Glossary of Terms

**AA** - Association Agreement  
**ANACEC** - the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (Moldova)  
**ANQA** - the National Centre for Professional Quality Assurance Foundation (Armenia)  
**ASHE** - Agency for Science and Higher Education (Croatia)  
**BICG** - Bologna Implementation Coordination Group  
**CAF** - Common Assessment Framework  
**CC** - Coordinating Council  
**CEENQA** - Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education  
**DAAD** - German Academic Exchange Service  
**DEQAR** - Database of External Quality Assurance Results  
**ECTS** - European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System  
**EHEA** - European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process  
**ELFA** - The European Law Faculties Association  
**EMIS** - Education Management Information System  
**ENQA** - European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education  
**ENIC** - NARIC Network - European Network of National Information Centers  
**EPDAD** - Teacher Education Programs Evaluation and Accreditation Association (Turkey)  
**EQAR** - European Quality Assurance Register  
**ESG** - the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area  
**ESU** - European Students' Union  
**ESTDEV** - Estonian Centre for International Development  
**ETF** - European Training Foundation  
**EUA** - European University Association  
**EQA** - External Quality Assurance  
**EQF** - European Qualification Framework  
**EWMI** - East-West Management Institute  
**FIBAA** - The Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (Germany)  
**HAKA** - Estonian Quality Agency for Education  
**HE** - Higher education  
**HERE** - Higher Education Reform Experts  
**HEIs** - Higher Education Institutions  
**IAAR** - Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (Kazakhstan)  
**IQA** - Internal Quality Assurance  
**LEPL** - Legal Entity of Public Law  
**MD** - Medical Doctor  
**MoES** - Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia  
**NGO** - Non-Governmental Organization  
**NQF** - National Qualifications Framework  
**NCEA** - National Center for Educational Accreditation  
**NCEQE** - National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement  
**QA** - Quality Assurance  
**QMS** - Quality Management System  
**SAR** - Self-Assessment Report  
**SICI** - Membership in Standing International Conference of Inspectorates  
**TKTA** - Azerbaijani Education Quality Assurance Agency  
**USAID** - United States Agency for International Development  
**WFME** - World Federation for Medical Education

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## Introduction

[National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement](#) (NCEQE) is the only authorized educational quality assurance agency in Georgia. It has become a legal successor of the National Center for Educational Accreditation (NCEA) established earlier in 2006. Starting from 2006, as the first quality assurance agency, the NCEA was authorized for the institutional accreditation of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Georgia (Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, #222, 27.03.2006). In 2010, with the explicit purpose of ensuring the educational quality assurance, the NCEQE was established by the Law of Georgia on Educational Quality Enhancement (Annex 1.), as an independent legal entity of public law (LEPL) under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of Georgia, guaranteeing the independence in its activities.

In 2013, the NCEQE became an affiliate at the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and later, in 2015, it acquired the status of an affiliate of European University Association (EUA). During 2015-2018, NCEQE led the policy reform of the higher education (HE) quality assurance system towards a more compliance and development-oriented, student-centered, and outcome-based evaluation approach, to ensure its alignment with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015). From 2018, NCEQE started the implementation of the revised QA system and subsequent procedures. Being committed to the implementation of ESG 2015, contributing to coherence in HE through the Bologna Process and development of cooperation in HE Quality Assurance (QA), in 2018, the NCEQE applied for full membership to the ENQA and for the registration in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). In 2018, NCEQE underwent an ENQA-coordinated review. In April 2019, the Board of ENQA granted the NCEQE full [membership](#) for five years and concluded its compliance with the ESG 2015 and further membership criteria. Furthermore, preceded by the positive evaluation of the ENQA, the NCEQE got [registered](#) at the EQAR in June 2019. Moreover, the NCEQE was expected to address the recommendations of the ENQA expert panel and submit the follow-up report in two years to demonstrate the clear evidence of taking measures towards the areas of development.

The working group on the fulfillment of the ENQA recommendations was created in January 2020, composed of the NCEQE staff, HEIs Representatives and Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE). In parallel, the respective working meetings were held with the EU-funded Twinning project 'Strengthening capacities for quality assurance and governance of qualification' experts. The output report of the working group was finally revised by the Twinning experts. The NCEQE follow-up report for the period 2019-2021 was drafted and sent to the Board of ENQA in 2021. Later in 2021, the NCEQE underwent the progress visit.

Currently, this SAR is prepared in the context of renewing the membership of the NCEQE in ENQA and its listing in EQAR. The NCEQE considers this international external review as the opportunity for self-reflection on its external QA activities, demonstrating compliance with ESG 2015, while outlining where it stands now and clarifying areas of further improvement. Moreover, the NCEQE welcomes the ENQA

feedback as the valuable source for further development, to find the best solutions to the current challenges based on the internationally recognized standards/practices and consequently, for enhancing fitness to the purpose of the educational quality assurance mechanisms considering national and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and Bologna Process contexts. The renewal of the membership at the ENQA and re-registration at the EQAR will be a guarantee for further development of the Georgian HE system, and full implementation of the ongoing and planned reforms. Application for the ENQA membership and registration in the EQAR is also a contribution of the NCEQE to the implementation and fulfillment of duties outlined in the Georgia-EU Association Agreement (AA), signed in June 2014. Chapter 16 of the Association Agreement is about cooperation in the field of education and training, and involves approximation to relevant EU policies and practices, including enhancement of quality of HE.

The Center continuously works to update the external quality assurance standards and procedures to ensure their alignment with the ESG 2015. By submitting this SAR to the ENQA and the EQAR, the Center aims to share and contribute to European cooperation in HE quality assurance and transparency of quality assurance, enhancing trust and confidence in national and international context.

This SAR follows the ENQA guidelines for Agency Reviews and structure of the guide of content for the SAR of the ENQA Agency Reviews. It explains the national context of the Georgian higher education system, QA processes and related activities of the NCEQE, addressing its compliance with each standard of Part 2 and 3 of the ESG. Furthermore, the SAR demonstrates the progress of the NCEQE made after the first review up to now.

The Structure of the SAR is as follows:

- **Chapter 2** introduces the process of SAR elaboration;
- **Chapter 3** is about the higher education system of Georgia and the system of external quality assurance;
- **Chapter 4** provides the full picture of the NCEQE external quality assurance activities;
- **Chapter 5** demonstrates how the NCEQE complies with the part 3 of ESG 2015;
- **Chapter 6** clarifies the compliance of the NCEQE activities with part 2 of ESG 2015;
- **Chapter 7** provides standpoints of the stakeholders involved in the process;
- **Chapter 8** overviews the changes the NCEQE made in relation to the recommendations and main findings from the previous review and the follow-up;
- **Chapter 9** is about the NCEQE SWOT analysis;
- **Chapter 10** reveals the key challenges the Center is facing now.

## 2. Development of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR)

As outlined above, in March 2018, the NCEQE initiated a self-evaluation process as a prerequisite for the ENQA membership. Upon successful completion of the evaluation, the NCEQE became a member of the ENQA and subsequently undertook measures to comply with the recommendations outlined in the ENQA's external review report of

2019. In 2021, the NCEQE submitted a follow-up report to the ENQA, which was duly acknowledged. The center continues to adhere to ESG requirements and is continuously working on enhancing its processes and activities to improve the quality of higher education.

As part of the process for re-assessment, the NCEQE has convened an official working group in 2023, which comprises of a diverse range of stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive reflection of the Center's performance from different perspectives. The working group included the staff of the NCEQE, HE experts, students, employers, members of the decision-making body, and the members of the Coordinating Council of the NCEQE (For the detailed composition of the self-assessment group indicating positions of members please see Annex 2). This core group was responsible for preparing the self-evaluation report.

During the initial phase of the self-evaluation process, the team responsible for the task convened to discuss and allocate responsibilities. The team met several times, and the members also conducted a SWOT analysis of the NCEQE to ensure that the process would move in the right direction. Once the group members had collected the necessary information, they discussed the draft version of the self-evaluation report among themselves. The self-evaluation team also considered the previous and follow-up reports of the agency when preparing the self-evaluation report.

To ensure transparency and inclusivity, public discussions were held to share the information, feedback was gathered from different stakeholders and their perspectives were incorporated into the report. The draft of the report was discussed among the entire NCEQE management and community, experts, HEIs, and members of the decision-making bodies, the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. The draft report was also published online on the official [website](#) of the NCEQE. After receiving feedback, the self-evaluation report was finalized and approved by the Director.

The process of self-evaluation allowed the agency to undertake a comprehensive assessment of its progress and evaluate the extent to which it adheres to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Moreover, the process facilitated an in-depth understanding of the Center's activities, both from an internal and external perspectives. Additionally, the self-assessment process enabled the Center to identify its current positioning among stakeholders. Also, the process has clearly demonstrated the areas of future improvements that will be further developed by the NCEQE.

### 3.Higher Education and QA of Higher Education in the Context of the Agency

#### **Development of Higher Education and QA of Higher Education System in Georgia**

The governance of the higher education system in Georgia is regulated by the [Law on Higher Education](#), [the Law on Educational Quality Enhancement](#), and other related

[sub-legal acts](#)<sup>1</sup>. Significant changes and reforms have been implemented since the adoption of the new law on higher education in 2004, which adhered to the main requirements of the Bologna Process. In 2005, Georgia's inclusion in the Bologna Process led to the implementation of higher education system reforms, including the introduction of the three-cycle structure of the Higher Education, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Quality Assurance System for Higher Education. This resulted in the establishment of an institutional accreditation process, which was a mandatory procedure for determining the status of a higher education institution (HEI). The law also emphasized the need for HEIs to develop internal quality assurance procedures.

Following the completion of the first cycle of institutional accreditation, the new Law on Educational Quality Enhancement was adopted in 2010. This law specifically defined the authorization of educational institutions and accreditation of educational programs as external quality assurance mechanisms for higher education. Authorization of educational institutions is mandatory for all HEIs to be permitted to operate in the country and issue state-recognized diplomas, and accreditation of higher educational programs is a mandatory program evaluation. The standards and procedures for authorization of HEIs (Annex - 3) and accreditation of higher educational programs (Annex - 4) are regulated by the orders of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, (Respectively: The Charter of Authorization of Educational Institutions, order #99/n, 01/10/2010 and the Charter of Accreditation of Educational Programs, Order #65/n, 04/05/2011). In addition, based on the analysis of best international practices and a commitment to continuously improving quality assurance in Georgia, a cluster accreditation system for programs has been implemented in the country since 2022. This system allows either accreditation of individual higher education programs, or programs grouped in clusters. The cases when an HEI can undergo through the individual program accreditation process are defined by the Accreditation Charter<sup>2</sup>. For example, a HEI refers to the individual accreditation if a program is a new, or there are no other similar programs within the same field of study.

More detailed information about HE system in Georgia, the [National Qualifications Framework](#) (NQF), official governing bodies in Georgian HEIs, admission preconditions to HEIs in Georgia, please see the Annex 5.

## 4. History, Profile, and Activities of the Agency

### 4.1 History and Profile of the NCEQE

The introduction of the institutional accreditation as an external quality assurance mechanism was part of the country's policy agenda to modernize the national higher education system and establish basic quantitative, input-based parameters that HEIs had to adhere to in order to operate as a HEI and issue state-recognized diplomas.

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<sup>1</sup> There are three core sub-legal acts related to the activities of the Center and the Higher Education Quality Assurance: the NCEQE Charter №99/n, the Authorization Charter №99 and the Accreditation Charter №65.

<sup>2</sup> Article 20, paragraph 2 of the Accreditation Charter

In order to conduct the institutional accreditation for higher education institutions, the National Center for Educational Accreditation (NCEA) was established by the Order of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia in 2006. As a result, educational quality assurance issues have been legally defined by this specific law. Additionally, in 2010, the National Center for Educational Accreditation (NCEA) underwent a reorganization, was renamed, and established as an independent agency (legal entity of public law - LEPL) the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement of Georgia (NCEQE), as per the order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (order 89/n, dated 14/09/2010) (See Charter of the NCEQE – Annex 6).

Rationale behind this reorganization was to shift to more content and quality wise standards, which would better support development of quality culture in Georgia. With regards to external quality assurance procedures, institutional authorization (institutional evaluation) was established in 2010, followed by program accreditation in 2011.

Signing the EU-Georgia AA in 2014 triggered significant changes in the education system as well. Starting from 2015-2018, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) has initiated and implemented a comprehensive implementation of revised quality assurance mechanisms for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Georgia. The main aim of the new quality assurance system was to be more development-oriented, student-centered, and outcome-based, as well as to achieve full compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015) for quality assurance in the higher education system. The process itself became more comprehensive, flexible, transparent, and encompassing the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, involving international experts, student experts and labor market representatives in the evaluation.

The [Order №89/n](#) (see annex 6) by the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia specifies the objectives, functions, structure, and management of the Agency. All the activities the Center runs are aligned with its established [vision and mission](#), based on objectivity, transparency and impartiality. In addition to the legal acts mentioned in this SAR, the Center is also guided by the [General Administrative Code](#), which regulates the general rules and procedures for conducting administrative proceedings.

The Center undertakes the following major functions:

- a. **Development Standards and Procedures of Authorization and Accreditation** and their continuous improvement;
- b. **External Quality Assurance of Higher Education** – the NCEQE carries out the authorization of HEIs and accreditation of HE programs; evaluates the compliance against the authorization and accreditation standards;
- c. **External Quality Assurance of Early and Preschool, General, and Vocational Education** – the NCEQE evaluates the compliance of early and preschool, general and vocational educational institutions against the standards<sup>3</sup>;

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<sup>3</sup> Each type of the educational institutions is evaluated by the appropriate external QA standards and procedures.



- d. **Management and Development of National Qualifications Framework and a Classifier of the Fields of Study** – the NCEQE manages and develops the National Qualifications Framework (NQF); elaborates the sectoral benchmarks with the full-fledged involvement of the stakeholders and creates the related sector councils/working groups;
- e. **Supports the Development of Quality Culture** – for that purpose, the Center elaborates the recommendations, carries out the pilot/development-oriented reviews, organizes training, holds seminars and conferences. Also, the Agency provides the supportive mechanisms for HEIs and other interested parties, and plans the activities supporting internal QA mechanisms of HEIs;
- f. **Recognition of Education** – the NCEQE recognizes the foreign education and confirms authenticity of educational documents issued in Georgia.

Besides these functions mentioned, the Center executes other activities defined by the legislation of Georgia.

The NCEQE involves its stakeholders in its decision-making processes and incorporates their feedback to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive quality assurance system. Moreover, the NCEQE is committed to transparency and accountability. The NCEQE communicates about its processes, evaluation outcomes, and recommendations to the public and has mechanisms of complaints and appeals in place to ensure fair and transparent procedures (Also see the Chapter 7).

The NCEQE strives to deepen international collaboration and networking to foster mutual learning, benchmarking, and sharing of best practices.

#### 4.2. NCEQE Strategic Goals for 2021-2025

Following its own mission, the Center is to support education quality enhancement by providing services that are user-oriented and based on internationally recognized standards and best local practices, as well as by supporting enhancement of quality-oriented governance.

The NCEQE strategic and action plan has been elaborated by the specific [methodology](#) approved by the NCEQE Director (the Order №14373) with active engagement of interested parties. The Center has the relevant procedures developed to carry out the evaluation and monitoring of its strategy and action plans. The specific electronic portal ([monitoring.eqe.ge](http://monitoring.eqe.ge)) is established by the Rules of the Elaboration, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Strategy and Action Plan for the Strategy Implementation of the NCEQE approved by the Director of the Center.

To support the mission, the Center has developed seven overarching [strategic goals](#) for 2021-2025. Furthermore, these strategic goals are backed by the annual action plans, where the required human, financial and material resources are all respectively indicated.

Specifically, the Strategic Goal **№2 and №6** are about the activities the NCEQE conducts in terms of the enhancing HE external QA system and its internationalization, including the membership of the Center in international and local networks of HE quality assurance, and cooperation with the agencies. The Strategic Goal №6 is divided into two objectives (6.1.& 6.2.), underlining the compliance of

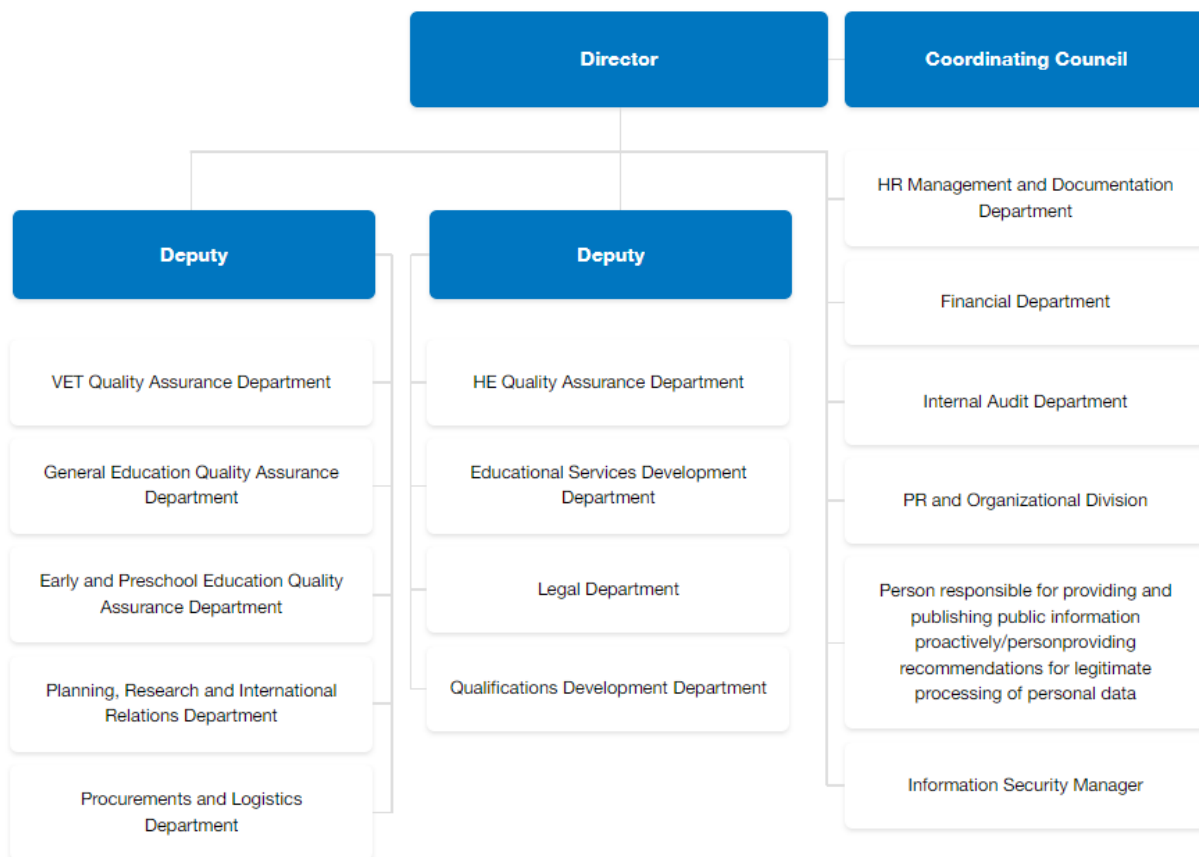
the national external QA standards and procedures with the ESG 2015, and involvement of high-quality experts in the process.

To ensure the compliance with the European QA guidelines and procedures, the Center has defined the concrete activities including the implementation of cluster accreditation, additional criteria for the evaluation of PhD programs and piloting, analysis of the selection procedure of the Councils and initiation of the respective amendments, continuity of the thematic analysis, and facilitation of the implementation of the activities planned within the framework of different international programs.

Regarding the involvement of high-quality experts in the evaluation process, the Center announces open calls and to attract new local and international experts, including students and employers. Additionally, the Center sets the priority of professional development of the expert pools of authorization and accreditation, and creation of the platform to support their professional development.

To ensure fulfillment of the strategic priorities, the Center constantly develops external QA mechanisms, considering the best local and international practices, in line with the ESG 2015.

### 4.3. Organizational Structure and Management of the Center



Through this organizational structure, the NCEQE ensures the achievement of the strategic goals, effective functioning, and institutional sustainability in general. It is

noteworthy that the needs-based organizational arrangement is listed as one of the strategic objectives (2021-2025) of the Center to provide rational planning/use of the resources. Moreover, from 2015 to 2019, the NCEQE was using the EFQM model to ensure organizational accountability and effectiveness and reached the level "Recognized to Excellence." In 2023, the Center started to use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), more applicable to the public organizations, and requiring the fully-fledged engagement of the representatives of all structural units.

Recently, in 2020-2022, the Center underwent an important structural and functional reorganization. It aimed to optimize the human resources, to ensure the delegation of the functions among the structural units and proper workload of the staff, and to increase the effectiveness of the Center in general. As a result of the reorganization:

- Within the framework of the department, two divisions have been merged under the title 'HE Quality Assurance Department;

The Charters of the Center, and of the structural units were changed appropriately. Also, other structural changes have occurred, but not directly related to HE QA.

The Center had two administrative bodies: Director and Coordinating Council (CC). The Charter of the Center explicitly defines the responsibilities and areas of their supervision (Article 5 and 5<sup>1</sup> of Order #89/n, 14/09/2010). The Director of the Center has an authority to manage the Center, coordinate the structural units, appoint, and dismiss the staff, define the functions and obligations of the structural units/subdivisions, distribute duties and responsibilities, use incentives and disciplinary measures against the staff of the Center, issue administrative legal acts, represent the Center, delegate the authority, announce the competitions, and create the respective commissions. Moreover, the Director is authorized to create sectoral councils, commissions and/or other advisory bodies and uses their analysis, reporting and recommendations to increase the efficiency of the activities of the Center and approves the relevant procedures/rules.

Furthermore, in agreement with the CC, the Director approves strategic and action plans of the Center and the information security management policy. Also, the Director agrees with the CC any developments, amendments or/and changes to the Charter of the Center and authorization/accreditation standards and procedures.

The Council has 13 members, appointed by the Minister of Education and Science for two years, upon the nomination of the Director. The Chair of the CC is elected by the members of the CC during the first meeting for two years. The work of the CC is supported by the Department of Planning, Research and International Relations. The composition and qualification requirements for the CC are described in this SAR (p. 16-17) and in Annex 8.

The NCEQE managerial functions are also delegated to two Deputy Directors. From 2022, with the purpose of ensuring the delegation of functions and responsibilities, all QA-related orders are issued by the Deputy Directors. For example, an order seeking a status of authorization, or an order on the creation of the expert pool or adding a new member to the Pool, etc. Other documents of external QA, for example, submission of the expert panel review report to a HEI or invitation to the Council are

sent out by the relevant QA structural units. It underlines that the governance of the Center is decentralized and the functions and responsibilities are appropriately delegated to.

The functions of each structural unit are defined by Order 89/n on Establishment of the NCEQE. Also, they have their own charters.

Four separate departments are dealing with educational quality assurance:

- Early and Preschool Education Quality Assurance Department;
- General Education Quality Assurance Department;
- VET Quality Assurance Department;
- HE Quality Assurance Department;
- Qualifications Development Department

HE Quality Assurance Department is responsible to execute authorization and program accreditation, to ensure the quality assurance mechanisms in line with the recommendations of Bologna process and ESG, to cooperate with international experts, organizations, and foreign quality assurance agencies to develop authorization and accreditation standards and procedures, to elaborate the QA development-related recommendations and submit to the Director. Furthermore, this department manages and develops an expert pool, and evaluates it. Also, it facilitates the engagement of international experts, executes monitoring visits to evaluate the compliance of HEIs and educational programs against the standards. Additionally, this department holds meetings with stakeholders interested in HE QA, plans and executes pilot visits, prepares the QA related recommendations and guidelines for HEIs and other stakeholders to improve the quality of HE. And it administers the recognition of foreign accreditation of HE programs. The Qualifications Development Department maintains the National Qualifications and developments sectoral benchmarks for different fields of study in higher education that are used in external QA framework.

#### 4.4. NCEQE International Cooperation

The NCEQE endeavors to continually expand its [international collaboration](#) and engagement in various international initiatives. The NCEQE tries to share valuable international experiences, promote the implementation of best practices, and enhance the capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) in terms of quality assurance (QA).

Within the scope of its activities, the NCEQE cooperates with international-wide organizations and participates in various projects being implemented under the umbrella of the ENQA and EQAR, the WFME, the European Network of Information Centers (ENIC-NARIC Network), the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), the Twinning Project, Erasmus + programs ([PROFFORMANCE+](#); [DUGEOR](#); [HERD](#); [SQUARE](#); [ETHICS](#), and etc.). Moreover, the Center signed the memoranda of cooperation with the Education Quality Assurance Agency (TKTA, Azerbaijan), Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE, Croatia), the Agency for Quality Assurance (AQAS, Germany), Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR, Kazakhstan), Teacher Education Programs Evaluation and Accreditation Association (EPDAD, Turkey), the

National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA, Ukraine), the European Law Faculties Association (ELFA), the Estonian Centre for International Development (ESTDEV), the National Centre for Professional Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA, Armenia), the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA, Germany), the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC, Moldova).

Furthermore, the Center became a part of the networks (for instance, Global Academic Integrity Network - GAIN) and hosts international events in Tbilisi. Under the umbrella of the Bologna Process, the NCEQE cooperates within TPG A on QF, TPG B on LRC, TPG C on QA, Higher Education Social Dimension (SD), Learning and Teaching Work Group, etc. In September 27-28, 2023, the Center will host the Thematic Peer Group TPG A on QF working meeting on self-certification of the NQF.

For detailed information about the international projects, events, memoranda of cooperation, see Annex 7.

#### 4.5 List of External QA Activities Undertaken by the NCEQE

The NCEQE implements three key external QA activities:

1. **Authorization of HEIs** (including the subprocess - Increasing student quotas at HEI);
2. **Accreditation of educational programs** (including the subprocesses - Increasing student quotas for Medical Doctor (MD) programs and International Accreditation of Education Programs of HEIs Operating Abroad);
3. **Accreditation of Joint programs.**

**Authorization of Higher Educational Institutions (HEI)** - is an external mechanism of higher education quality assurance, which is coordinated by the NCEQE. Authorization is an institutional evaluation, which determines compliance of an institution with the authorization standards. The evaluation process is carried out by an expert panel and is based on the analysis of the information provided in the self-assessment report (SAR) of the institution, its appendices and the data collected during the site-visit. Authorization is obligatory for all the HEIs to be allowed to carry out educational activities and issue a diploma that is recognized by the state. All authorization reports accompanied by final decisions are published on the DEQR database.

**Increasing student quotas at HEI** - Following the written application submitted by a HEI to the Center regarding the increase of the marginal number of students, expert panel reviews the application as well as a relevant methodology, conducts a site visit and provides a final report, based on which the Authorization Council makes the final decision on increasing the marginal number.

**Program Accreditation** - is a mechanism that aims to determine compliance of a higher educational program with accreditation standards, to establish a systematic self-evaluation of an educational institution, and to promote development of quality assurance mechanisms. The accreditation process is coordinated by the NCEQE. As a mandatory external evaluation procedure, it is carried out by a group of accreditation experts and is based on the analysis of an institution's self-assessment report (SAR), its appendices, and the information obtained through an accreditation site-visit. The

NCEQE conducts accreditation for a single program as well as group of programs, also known as cluster accreditation. All accreditation reports accompanied by final decisions are published on the DEQAR database.

**Increasing student quotas for MD (Medical Doctor) programs** - Following the written application submitted by a HEI to the Center regarding the increase of the marginal number of students on MD program, expert panel reviews the application as well as the respective methodology, the program specificities, and the allocated resources. A site-visit is conducted, and the Accreditation Council makes the final decision on increasing a marginal number of students on MD program.

**International Accreditation of Education Programs of HEIs Operating Abroad** - The recent legislative amendments allow the NCEQE to carry out international program accreditation. At the initial stage of being recognized as an accreditation seeker of a higher education institution operating abroad, an agreement is concluded between the Center and the institution defining the rights and responsibilities of the parties. The expert panel will include an international chair, the Georgian colleagues, and a member from the specific country of evaluation. The Georgian accreditation standards which are in line with ESG 2015 and local regulations both are considered in the evaluation process.

**Accreditation of Joint Programs** - When the HEI applies for accreditation of joint programs, run by local and foreign institutions, the NCEQE applies the European Approach. It is mandatory to agree the conditions of the partnership agreement between HEIs with the agency prior to submitting the application. When the local HEI teams up with the international partner university to establish a joint educational program, experts of each country are involved in the team of external reviewers as well. Hereby, it is worth noting that the NCEQE follows an established procedure to recognize the accreditation results of joint programs administered by a foreign agency.

## 5. Profile, Functioning and (EQA) Activities of the Agency (compliance with Part 3 of the ESG)

### ESG Standard 3.1 Activities, Policy and Processes for Quality Assurance

**Standard:** Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

NCEQE is the only authority, which has the right to carry out quality assurance procedures in the field of higher education within the country<sup>4</sup>. This is explicitly outlined in Order 89/n of the MoES, dated 14/09/2010. The main objectives of the NCEQE, as per the aforementioned order, include:

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<sup>4</sup> List of the external QA activities of the NCEQE, please see in subchapter 4.4.

- Fostering the creation of internal quality mechanisms within educational institutions, implementing external mechanisms, and cultivating their continued growth through collaboration with educational institutions and other stakeholders;
- Facilitating the unimpeded mobility of pupils, students, vocational learners, graduates, and academic personnel, with the aim of ensuring education, instruction, research, and employment opportunities in Georgia and abroad;
- Cultivating a culture of quality education within educational institutions;
- Promoting the integration of Georgian educational institutions into the international arena and increasing confidence in them.

Aligned with its objective, the NCEQE has developed its [vision, mission, and values](#), which are publicly available and accessible to all interested parties:

**Vision of the Center:** The Center represents a regional hub with high credibility and recognition on local and international levels, which offers a wide range of services related to education quality enhancement to the public.

**Mission of the Center:** The mission of the Center is to support education quality enhancement by providing services that are user-oriented and based on internationally recognized standards and best local practices, as well as by supporting enhancement of quality-oriented governance.

**Values of the Center:** The Center is primarily guided by the best interest of the persons involved in the educational process and carries out its activities based on the following values.

To fulfill its mission, vision, and values, the NCEQE endeavors to uphold the following principles throughout its activities:

**Objectivity:** Assessments carried out by us alongside self-evaluation are based on the standards established by the legislation and on factual circumstances. Established procedures eliminate partiality of the persons involved in the evaluation as much as possible.

**Transparency:** The standards and procedures of our activities, our visions and values are publicly accessible and known to all stakeholders in advance. Publicity of the information on the Center's activities is ensured.

**Impartiality:** We ensure that the decisions made by the Center are in line with the legislation and that they account for the best interest of the involved stakeholders.

**Cooperation:** We are open to cooperation with stakeholders. We review the novelties, offers and different opinions in a constructive manner and are driven to find solutions to problems.

**Development and Innovation:** We systematically evaluate our activities and plan innovative ways for development based on the results of evaluation. We offer the same approach to the education providers, and we expect the same from our partners.

In 2020, the NCEQE's mission, vision, and values underwent a review process that included input from all interested parties, such as experts, the NCEQE community, and HEIs. After gathering their feedback, the current version was approved in December 2020 along with the NCEQE's new strategic plan for 2021-2025. The NCEQE **strategic planning** is a participatory process, incorporating various internal and external stakeholders. The strategy is designed for five years, in line with the strategic directions of the education system of Georgia and corresponding to the core highlights of the European Education area. The Agency has the policy of the Elaboration, Monitoring and Evaluation of Strategic and Action Plans that is a subject of revision every five years. In 2020, within the framework of the EU-funded Twinning project, a [new methodology](#) of strategic planning was established and the strategic concept for 2021-2025 was elaborated based on it. The new strategy document of the Center covers all key functional directions of the Agency, considering the results of the evaluation of the previous one.

The NCEQE is constantly oriented towards developing strategic and action plans, and the respective revision (if applicable). Furthermore, since 2021, based on the recommendations received within the EU-funded Twinning project, the Agency has been monitoring and evaluating the progress of the activities set in the action plan by the e-platform – [monitoring.eqe.ge](http://monitoring.eqe.ge)<sup>5</sup>. This platform is effective to track the progress online, observe the drawbacks and challenges in the implementation process, as well as generate and sort the relevant data. Since 2022, the progress reports of the Agency have been prepared by use of the information generated from the e-platform.

NCEQE implements following external quality assurance activities: Authorization of HEIs (including increasing of student quotas at HEI), Program Accreditation (including - Increasing student quotas for Medical Doctor (MD) programs and International Accreditation of Education Programs of HEIs Operating Abroad) and Accreditation of Joint Programs<sup>6</sup>, , in line with the aforementioned objectives, mission, vision, values, and [strategic plan](#).

The table below summarizes the number of procedures per each EQA activities were implemented for the last five years:

Activity/ Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Authorization</b>	29	12	3	20	4
Increasing student quotas at HEI	6	7	1	2	0
<b>Programme Accreditation</b>	200	220	216	322	160
Increasing student quotas for MD programmes	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	0

<sup>5</sup> This link is accessible only through local VPN.

<sup>6</sup> The detailed description of these activities, please see in the subchapter 4.4.



International Accreditation of Education Programmes of HEIs Operating Abroad	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	0
<b>Accreditation of Joint Programmes</b>	1	2	7	0	9

Above mentioned external QA activities adhere to predetermined authorization and accreditation standards and procedures outlined in the respective parts of the report, as approved by the Minister of Education and Science. These standards and procedures are accessible to all interested parties via the NCEQE's website and the Legislative Herald of Georgia. The authorization and accreditation standards consider the ESG 2015, as well as address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance and support institutional responsibility for quality assurance.

In addition to its strong cooperation with all stakeholders to ensure a common understanding and public trust towards the external quality assurance system, the NCEQE provides supportive mechanisms to all HEIs to assist in enhancing and improving quality. Furthermore, the NCEQE gathers feedback from various stakeholders including experts and HEIs, which is then analyzed to identify areas of improvement.

It is noteworthy that the NCEQE's mission, vision, values, and strategic documents were developed in collaboration with various stakeholders, including representatives from HEIs, through public discussion formats. Additionally, the [Coordinating Council](#) has been established as a collegial body to ensure stakeholder involvement in the management and development of the Center. The Coordinating Council was established in 2018, however, following the recommendations of ENQA experts, the council's composition and main functions underwent significant changes. The qualification requirements (this information can be found in Annex 8) were clarified, and the positions were fully staffed. As a result, the Council's role shifted from advisory to managerial, and additional significant functions were added to its responsibilities.

The Coordinating Council comprises:

- Representatives of the public or private HEIs (except, a head of a higher education institution (rector), vice-rector, head of an administration (a chancellor), a head of a quality assurance service, founder of a HE or/and a shareholder), general and/or vocational education institutions (except for the person holding an administrative position and a founder or/and shareholder of an institution);
- Representatives of the MoES (except of Minister and Deputy Minister);
- Students' representative;
- Employers' representative;
- Civil society representative (CSO/NGO);

- 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.

Since 2019, 10 meetings of the Coordinating Council have been held (see the [minutes of the CC](#)). The composition of the previous and current CC can be seen [here](#). The Qualification requirements for the members of the CC and differences in relation to the composition and functioning of the Coordinating Council in 2018 and in 2023 can be seen in Annex 8. In order to facilitate ongoing progress and enhance effective engagement with stakeholders in the governance of the NCEQE, the Center is considering an extension of the CC's term of the office from 2 to 5 years, corresponding to one strategic cycle. Additionally, the Center intends to enhance the selection process for the CC by implementing a commission-based approach. At present, the Center requests educational institutions (schools, VETs, HEIs), MoES, non-governmental (NGO), international and student organizations, to submit suitable candidates who meet the qualification requirements for the members of the CC. International members of the CC are selected from partner organizations of the NCEQE. Subsequently, the Director of the Center selects the Council members according to these qualification requirements and presents to the Minister for final approval. Moreover, the Center aims to further expand the responsibilities of the CC, that is described in detail in this SAR (p.18).

Moreover, to demonstrate the fulfillment of its mission and strategic priorities and share information with stakeholders, the NCEQE prepares [annual reports](#) that are publicly available. Additionally, an annual conference is organized where all the NCEQE stakeholders are invited to discuss the organization's progress and the current trends in quality assurance in Georgia and throughout Europe. During the annual conference other activities carried out by the NCEQE are also discussed, which are not scope of the ENQA evaluation.

### ESG Standard 3.2 Official Status

**Standard:** Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

The NCEQE is a legal entity of public law (LEPL) established by the Law on Education Quality Enhancement under the umbrella of the MoES to independently carry out its activities national and international-wide<sup>7</sup>. Also, by this Law, the NCEQE is recognized as the sole national independent body authorized to enhance educational quality assurance, conducts institutional evaluation which serves as the basis for HEIs to operate. It has its independent organizational structure, material assets and budget.

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<sup>7</sup> Legal Entity of Public Law means an organization that is separated from legislative and state governing bodies, established by the law which independently controls, carries out political, social, and educational, cultural, and other public activities.

The outcomes of the NCEQE external evaluation activities are accepted by the broader public.

### ESG Standard 3.3 Independence

**Standard:** Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence

As defined by the Law on Education Quality Enhancement and the Charter, the Center is independent in its activities, adhering to the principles of transparency and publicity, the Constitution of Georgia, international agreement, and other legal acts.

The Center operates independently and autonomously while implementing its activities. It has an exclusive authority to external quality assurance and specifically, leads and organizes the process of developing, revising, and implementing the principles and procedures of quality assurance, initiates and amends the regulatory frameworks for authorization and accreditation, nominates the members of the collegial bodies (authorization, accreditation, and appeals councils), etc.

It is worth mentioning that the ENQA-panel of the previous review (2018) had questions over the role of the MoES in appointing and dismissal the Director and the Councils members in terms of the independence of the Center. The NCEQE team addressed these recommendations and further steps were in-depth explained in the follow-up report (covering the reporting period 2019-2021) sent to the ENQA secretariat that was accepted, and the respective progress was approved. This information can also be found in section 8 of this SAR.

The NCEQE has institutional independence backed by organizational, operational, and formal outcomes.

#### **Organizational Independence**

With the purpose of enhancing its organizational independence, the Center has taken decisive steps to increase the role of the Coordinating Council (CC), and the respective amendments have been made to the Charter of the Center. The CC became more operational in 2019, and its functions were increased and shifted from advisory to managerial structural body, ensuring the involvement of different stakeholders. The members of the CC were fully enlisted and the engagement of a student in the works of the CC became obligatory. The rule of the CC composition was also changed, as the top management of educational institutions and public officials (minister and deputy minister) cannot be appointed as the members. The qualification requirements for the CC members have been revised (See Annex 8).

Regarding the appointment and dismissal of the NCEQE Director, the Minister is obliged to recruit a director through the open call. This process is regulated by the [Law of Georgia on Legal Entities Under the Public Law](#)<sup>8</sup>. The recruitment procedures are delegated to the Selection Committee. This Law also defines the grounds for the dismissal of a director, and the decision on dismissal must be evidence-based and clearly stated. The decision on dismissal can be appealed to the Court and the

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<sup>8</sup> The English version of this Law is an edition of 2018. The latest version is accessible in Georgian language.

respective procedures exist. It is noteworthy that the current NCEQE Director is a former Deputy Director of the Center serving in 2015-2019.

The amendments to the [Rule of Selection](#) of the members of the Councils (Authorization, Accreditation and Appeals) have also contributed to the enhancement of formal outcomes, while increasing ownership of the NCEQE over the processes. According to these changes, the selection of the Councils' members is delegated to the Selection Committee<sup>9</sup>, including the representatives of the NCEQE, the MoES, HEIs and other entities, and led by the NCEQE Director. The participation of the CC in the selection of the Councils' members became obligatory, as the members of the CC are also part of the Councils' Members Selection Committee defined by the NCEQE Charter. The increase of the term of the office of the Authorization/Appeals Councils' members from 1 to 2 years and introduction of the closed voting have supported the independence of the Councils from the interested parties.

With the purpose of ensuring more financial sustainability, and with the involvement of all structural units, the financial department leads the process of budgeting. The self-sufficient services provide the Center with its own financial resources that ensure its operational independence. In relation to financial independence, the data shows that the share of state funding in 2018 was 58% and self-sufficient services was 37%, and grants comprised 5% of the Center budget. In 2022, the state budget was 30%, and own income was 67%, and grants comprised 3% of the Center budget. These data evidence that the financial independence of the Agency is increasing by years, and the Center independently decides on how to allocate and use these funds (more information about the financial recourses of the NCEQE please see in chapter 3.5).

It is worth mentioning that during the autumn of 2023, the NCEQE plans to initiate increasing the role of the CC in appointment and dismissal of the Director of the Center. This will be a further step towards the increase of institutional independence.

### **Operational Independence**

The NCEQE has full operational independence in all directions of its external quality assurance activities referring both to the process and outcomes. The Center is entirely authorized to implement all steps of institutional review and program accreditation, starting from the selection/appointment of the international and local experts to the final stage of the submission of the evaluation report to the Councils for decision-making. Accordingly, the Center is autonomous while organizing the external evaluation procedures. Besides, any type of the decisions on authorization and accreditation is independently made by the relevant Council and there is no other authority to intervene.

As an independent body, the Center operates under its own Charter, and it could be the only initiator of any amendments to it. In the direction of HE quality assurance, any amendments to the Authorization/Accreditation Charters could only be introduced by the Center. Additionally, the Center has the exclusive authority to approve the [Rule of Experts'](#) and Code of Ethics.

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<sup>9</sup> This Selection Committee is different from the Selection Committee mentioned in the previous paragraph.

## Independence of Formal Outcomes

The amendments to the [Rule of Selection](#) of the members of the Councils (Authorization, Accreditation and Appeals) have also contributed to the enhancement of formal outcomes, while increasing ownership of the NCEQE over the processes. According to these changes, the selection of the Councils' members is delegated to the Selection Committee, including the representatives of the NCEQE, the MoES, HEIs and other entities, and led by the NCEQE Director. The participation of the CC in the selection of the Councils' members became obligatory. The increase of the term of the office of the Authorization/Appeals Councils' members from 1 to 2 years and introduction of the closed voting have supported the independence of the Councils from the interested parties.

Furthermore, the Center has been using other approaches to enhance the independence of its activities and formal outcomes such as introducing the Code of Ethics to the expert pool and guiding the Council members to be independent in their activities and do not act in the capacity of the institutions they represent. The guidance involves the introductory and working meetings with the Council members, where they get information on their roles and responsibilities, and QA methodologies applied by the Center. Also, the [Law on Educational Quality Enhancement](#) explicitly safeguards the functional independence of the Councils from the educational and state institutions<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, the Councils members/experts sign a formal agreement that they assume responsibility to declare any case of conflict of interest, and accordingly, do not participate in public hearings/voting/evaluation/decision-making concerning those cases which refer to those higher educational or other institutions affiliated with the HEIs/programs under evaluation. Moreover, the staff of the Center, administrating the process of authorization/accreditation, clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the panel members during the preparatory meetings, and the Council members are also aware of it. By such an approach, the Center ensures the independence of the formal outcome of the processes it conducts.

Furthermore, this is evidence of the independence that the decisions made by the Center (for instance, the Order on the creation of the expert panel, the Order on monitoring of HEIs etc.) or the Council (granting authorization/accreditation, revoking authorization, etc.) could only be appealed to the Georgian court, and no other superior authority exists. The Appeal Council or the Lawcourt are not eligible to change the achieved decision, and they can only return the case to the Councils for re-consideration. For further ensuring the independence of formal outcome, the Center considers the involvement of an international expert in Authorization and Accreditation Councils.

## ESG Standard 3.4 Thematic Analysis

**Standard:** Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

The NCEQE has consistently conducted system-wide analyses of external quality assurance mechanisms, and the results have been included in the annual reports and

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<sup>10</sup> Article 11 (paragraph 1); Article 19 (paragraph 2), Article 24<sup>1</sup> (paragraph 2) of the Law on Educational Quality Enhancement

shared with stakeholders during the NCEQE Annual Conference. However, during the previous evaluation by ENQA, this area was identified as requiring further development. Subsequently, the NCEQE took measures to establish a sustainable methodology for implementing systematic analysis, which were outlined in the follow-up report.

In 2019, as part of the Twinning Project, the NCEQE collaborated with experts from the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (HAKA) and the Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programs (AQAS) to develop a [methodology for implementing thematic analysis](#).

Furthermore, in 2020, the NCEQE established the Planning, Research, and International Relations Department as a dedicated unit for coordinating the work of thematic analysis ([as per the Amendment in the Charter of the NCEQE on 17th July, 2020](#)). This department is responsible for overseeing the ongoing thematic analyses. By conducting these analyses, the NCEQE can reflect on quality assurance policies and processes to enhance them at the institutional, national, and international levels.

With the support of an EU-funded Twinning project and other partners, the NCEQE conducted below mentioned thematic analyses and studies in the years 2019-2023:

- Analysis of Development and Implementation of the Authorization Mechanism for Higher Education Institutions (2018);
- Medical Education in Georgia: Quality Assurance, Main Trends and Challenges;
- Study: Implementation of the new Law Benchmarks in the process of accreditation of academic programs;
- Analysis of three-year interim reports of accreditation and authorization processes.

Pursuant to the Memorandum of Cooperation signed between the NCEQE and the Erasmus+ Georgia Office in 2019, an analysis of [Development and Implementation of the Authorization Mechanism for HEIs](#) was conducted on the introduction of updated mechanisms for the authorization of higher education institutions. It is noteworthy that a working group was established to review authorization standards, and the thematic analyses mentioned earlier will serve as the foundation for the proposed changes.

[Study: Implementation of the new Law Benchmarks in the process of accreditation of academic programs](#) was conducted under the 'Promoting Rule of Law in Georgia' project of the East-West Management Institute (EWMI) in collaboration with the NCEQE. The study has already been taken into consideration for the implementation of cluster accreditation standards.

Thematic analysis on [Medical Education in Georgia: Quality Assurance, Main Trends and Challenges](#) focuses on the issues related to higher medical education in Georgia and is intended for various stakeholders including higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, clinics and hospitals, and other actors involved in the healthcare sector. The aim of the report is to initiate a dialogue between stakeholders and facilitate effective actions for the sustainable development of medical education in Georgia. Also, the thematic analysis was used to further develop the sector

benchmark in 2022. The analysis is also shared with the international members of the expert panel.

In 2023 the thematic analysis was carried out on the topic "Three Year Progress Reports" with the purpose to evaluate the effectiveness of the three-year progress reports and their alignment to the goals as defined by the legislation and to develop ways for further improvement of the NCEQE's QA processes and to make general evaluation of the progress made by HEIs. Currently the draft version of the analyses is already prepared and the final version will be published in July 2023.

Furthermore, in response to the emerging changes in the higher education system during the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCEQE, with the support of the EWMI and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), announced a call for international experts to develop criteria and guidelines for online and blended teaching and learning. The project team relied on an [analysis report](#) developed by the NCEQE on online teaching and learning in emergency mode, as well as findings from focus groups with representatives from HEIs, students, experts, and the NCEQE staff. The resulting [guidance](#) sets out the results of these discussions and offers instruction to experts and institutions on evaluating institutional strategies to support innovation and online mode of teaching and learning. The guideline was considered during the development of program accreditation standards and the implementation of cluster accreditation.

Additionally, the following thematic analysis are planned in 2023:

- Thematic analysis in order to develop the legal framework for the introduction and recognition of micro credentials;
- Analysis of the cluster accreditation results of the previous year will be conducted at the end of each year;
- Analysis of the authorization process of higher education institutions implemented in 2018-2022.

It is worth mentioning that at each annual conference organized by the NCEQE, the outcomes of external QA activities are disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. Additionally, the Center actively collaborates with all HEIs in terms of designing thematic analysis, including their participation in the focus groups/interviews/follow-up discussions after the publication of the thematic analysis. Moreover, the NCEQE strives to enrich [cooperation](#) with HEIs having the education management programs at MA and PhD levels. The working meeting on this matter has already taken place between the NCEQE and the HEIs. Moreover, the incorporation and advancement of online platforms for higher education will greatly support the NCEQE in information tracking, data storage and digitalization of QA activities what would be later valuable for conducting thematic analyses.

## ESG Standard 3.5 Resources

**Standard:** Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work

The NCEQE has adequate and appropriate human, material, financial, and information system resources to carry out its activities.

### Human Resources

One of our main priorities is staff development. NCEQE has the functions and responsibilities defined for each structural unit and the respective qualifications for staffing. NCEQE conducts open competitions for staffing. Overall number of the Center staff is 162. In the HE Quality Assurance Department, 34 people are employed, including the permanent staff, staff with short term labour contracts including interpreters, stenographers, and an editor. 21 of them are responsible for coordinating the process of HE quality assurance<sup>11</sup>. Regarding the qualifications of the permanent staff of HE Quality Assurance Department, 4 of them have bachelor's degree, 16 have master's degree and one has a PhD degree. Most of them have qualifications in the education field. It is noteworthy that no one from the staff of the HE QA is affiliated with any HEI.

The staff professional development is regularly carried out for new and in-service staff. The NCEQE offers the diverse opportunities for professional development:

- Training carried out by external trainers and other staff with relevant experience;
- Participation in workshops, conferences, seminars, forums, and study visits;
- Development-oriented assignments;
- Mentorship;
- Mobility for career purposes.

Recently, in 2022, 2 trainings were organized for the purpose of staff professional development, within the framework of the EU-funded project "Public Administration Reform in Georgia". Specifically, in 2022, 8 staff from the HR Management and Documentation Department attended the training and the head of the structural units participated in the training on Role of a Manager in Evaluation (22 participants in total). In 2022, the staff of HR Management and Documentation Department (20 participants in total) attended the training on Effective Service conducted by the Center for Consultancy and Training (CTC). Totally, from 2018 to 2022, 48 training sessions were conducted, and around 110 business trips, mobilities and workshops abroad. Moreover, 6 staff of the HE QA Department participated in the international staff mobilities to ENQA-member agencies under the BFUG Thematic Group on QA, and it turned out to be unique opportunities to enhance the quality assurance procedures at the NCEQE.

To support staff professional development, the Center usually applies for scholarships and grants. For instance, in 2023 the Center applied for the US Library of Congress grant, the application was successful and the representatives of different departments of the Center, Higher Education Quality Assurance Department,

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<sup>11</sup> Note: In 2018, the number of staff worked in the Divisions of Authorization and Accreditation was 16.



Educational Services Development Department, and the Internal Audit Department visited the USA in May 2023 to observe the US higher education system, study management and quality assurance and internationalization of HE issues.

The NCEQE has approved the rules and procedures for staff performance evaluation. In 2023, the Center organized the training and then started the piloting of the electronic system of staff performance evaluation. The system is based on the evaluation of the skills and competencies required to perform the tasks at the workplace. The overall objective and outcome of this evaluation is to improve the quality of staff works, to increase staff involvement in the works of the Agency, to carry out result-oriented management, to improve the effectiveness of each staff member, to increase the quality of delegation, responsibility, and reporting, to develop the staff competency, to enhance the planning of the work, to motivate and encourage staff, and to support staff career growth.

The NCEQE regularly conducts a staff satisfaction survey. The most recent survey was done in 2022. The Center analyzed the results, planned the relevant steps and actions responding to the challenges revealed through this survey, and shared them with the staff. For example, 1/3 of the staff marked the stress and burnout at the workplace as the challenge. As a result, the Center introduced a more flexible schedule and an advantage of additional paid leave for 40 hours per year. Also, the NCEQE organized the training on stress management for the representatives of the structural units. Furthermore, more temporary contracts were signed to reduce the workload for the employees.

The NCEQE has an established procedure for staff motivation, using material and non-material incentives to stimulate staff. Totally, in 2018-2022, 11 staff were promoted including top management, 10 staff got the financial award, and 50 got the statement of appreciation for their contribution to the works of the Center. Also, since 2022, the NCEQE has been increasing salaries by 10% per year.

HR Management and Documentation Department plans to enhance the adaptation policy of a new employer and develop a mentoring program. The renewed Adaptation Policy will apply to new employees, as well as those who move to another position within the Center or having a career break due to certain reasons. In addition, during the adaptation period, the Center plans to provide new employees with e-training (the certain videos will be prepared), related to the practical activities. Furthermore, the Center will continue to offer employees different capacity and team building activities which will ensure continuous professional development of its staff.

### **Material Resources**

The NCEQE is in the central part of the capital of Georgia. The office building is 2227 sq. m., including 60 working rooms and 3 conference halls for meetings. In 2021, the Office of the Agency was renovated, new equipment was added. The building of the NCEQE has been granted to the Center by the state for the permanent exploitation.

In 2021 and 2022, the Procurements and Logistics Department studied the technical-material base and program provision in compliance with the functions and responsibilities of each structural unit. The technical material resources were evaluated, aimed at defining the staff satisfaction with available material resources,

and to reveal the needs. Based on the survey results, in 2022 and 2023, the Center purchased 75 desktop computers and 20 laptops. Also, other computer accessories were purchased to increase the operational data of the computers.

Totally, the Center now has 230 desktop computers, 60 laptop computers, and 70 printers. All the three conference rooms are equipped with audiovisual systems (microphones, speakers, cameras), screens and projectors.

It is noteworthy that during the pandemic, the Center moved to remote working which required the effective functioning of IT technologies. The Center provided distance accessibility to E-Flow system, purchased the package of online ZOOM platform, and some of the daily activities were shifted to this format, including the meetings of Authorization and Accreditation Councils. Such an approach ensured the involvement of various stakeholders in the Center's activities. Moreover, with the purpose of providing a remote working environment, the Procurements and Logistics Department delivered the laptops to the staff.

The NCEQE periodically assesses the material resources and based on the needs, it renews and improves the facilities. In the future it's planned to further develop the facilities of the Center for ensuring its full accessibility for the people with disabilities.

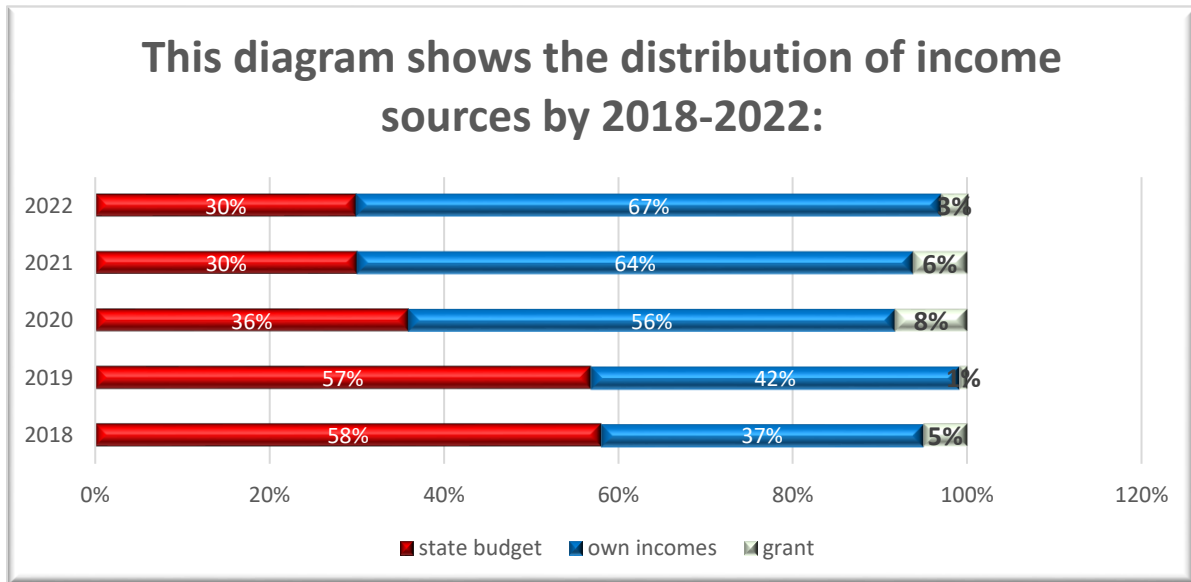
### **Financial Resources**

The Financial Department is in charge of managing the income of the Agency, mainly incorporating the funds from the services provided by the NCEQE, the state budget and other revenues. The services the NCEQE provides include the authorization of educational institutions (HEIs, VET and preschool/schools) and program accreditation, recognition of foreign education, validation of educational documents. All self-sufficient service fees the NCEQE provides are defined based on the transparent criteria, and in line with the legislation of Georgia.

With the purpose of providing financial sustainability, the Financial Department annually projects the budget, along with the objectives, mid-term outcomes and performance indicators of the Center. Furthermore, the budget is then monitored and the respective 3, 6, 9 - month and 1-year monitoring reports are prepared, in line with international standards. It is worth mentioning that within the framework of the reform of the management of public finances, the Center is participating in elaboration and implementation of International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS). In 2021, the Financial Department, in collaboration with the Planning, Research and International Relations Department, prepared the business process of the budget planning, and in 2022, the business process of budget monitoring was developed.

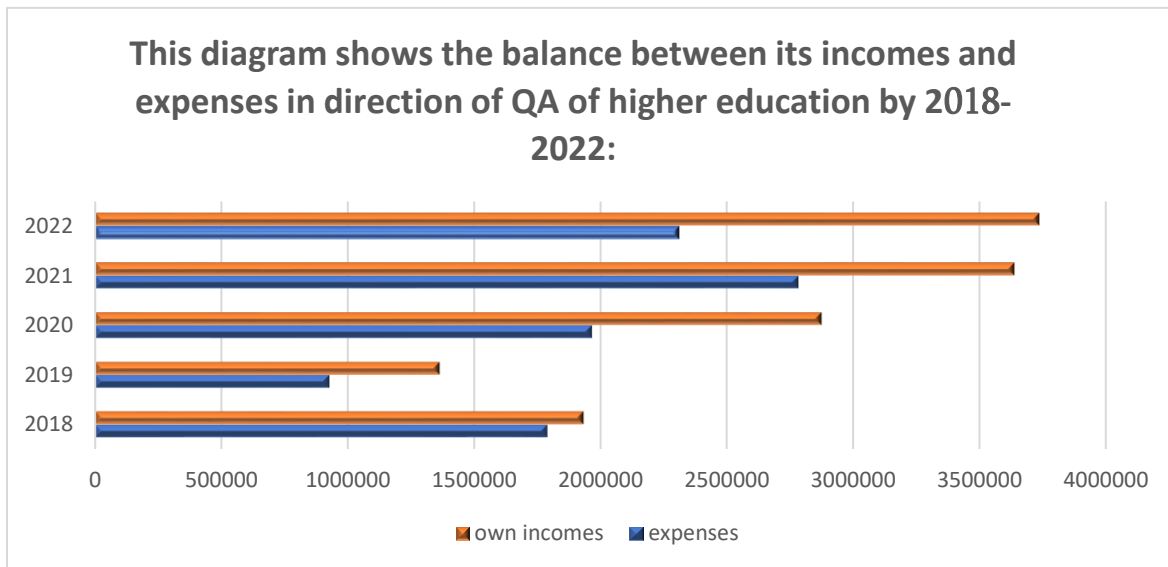
The budgeting process is evidently in line with the strategy of the Center and the relevant action plans. Furthermore, while elaborating the action plan, the budget lines are assigned to each activity. While budgeting, the interests of all structural units are considered.

**This diagram shows the distribution of income sources by 2018-2022:**



The increase of the NCEQE’s own income is explained by the revision of the accreditation and authorization fees by the Center, composing all the expenses. The key approach of the Center is to gradually decrease the dependence on the state budget. Accordingly, the service fees have been re-calculated, and they have become more self-sufficient and self-sustaining. Current trend is gradual decrease of dependence on the state income.

**This diagram shows own incomes and expenses of higher education QA department by 2018-2022:**



These diagrams show the financial sustainability of the Center.

## Information Systems

Since 2012, the Agency has been using the platform - E-flows to proceed with the documents. Since 2014, the Agency has the license version of Microsoft Windows and Office365, and Microsoft Teams used for distance team working. Since 2018, the Center has been digitizing and categorizing the archived files, making annotations, and systemizing the process.

Due to the outbreak of pandemic and shifting to the distance working, in 2021, the Center purchased Zoom Communication and Multimedia 15 packages (with provision of translation service), that have been used by the structural units to organize the meetings inside the Center or with other interested stakeholders.

In 2022, with the purpose of increasing the visibility of the Center and the Georgian education system abroad, the official web page of the Center was renewed and became more user-friendly, accessible, and content-wise. The information on the web page has been sorted out due to the type of consumer (student, HEI, employer, expert). The chat function of the site enables the visitors to ask questions and receive answers. A visitor can define who he is/what he is looking for, and then easily navigate through. It is noteworthy that the decisions of the Accreditation Council of Higher Education Programs and Authorization Council of Higher Education institutions are automatically synchronized with the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR).

In 2022, the Procurements and Logistics Department increased the human resources in the direction of software provision to provide the technical support for the e-platforms utilized by the Center. Now, a staff member is responsible for the technical support and maintenance of the existing software.

Additionally, the NCEQE plans to constantly develop and add software programs for effective implementation of different internal processes so that the data is collected and analyzed in a more systematic and automated manner.

The resources of the NCEQE enable the Center to organize and run external higher education quality assurance activities in an effective and efficient manner.

## ESG Standard 3.6 Internal Quality Assurance and Professional Conduct

**Standard:** Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

The NCEQE's internal quality assurance mechanisms are described in the NCEQE Internal Quality Assurance Policy that is an integral part of the NCEQE's internal rules approved by the Director. Also, a single structural unit – the Planning, Research and International Relations Department - has been established, responsible for the coordinating of the [Internal Quality Assurance Policy](#).

The Center has defined and using the following internal quality assurance mechanisms:

- Elaboration of Strategic and Action Plans, Monitoring and Evaluation;
- Evaluation of Staff Performance and Feedback;

- Effective Communication (regular meetings with staff, other interested parties and within the structural units);
- Self-evaluation, development and implementation of internal quality culture;
- Evidence-based decisions for development of effective system;
- Mechanisms for system-wide and effective evaluation;
- identification of key processes, elaboration of all regulatory documents and their publication.

For the purpose of ensuring internal quality assurance, the Center is using different approaches, including:

- Regular meetings with the CC and discussion of the topics envisaged by the Charter;
- Collection of feedback and proposals from the stakeholders on improvement of the services provided by the Center;
- Regular meetings with HEIs for improving the procedures, instruments and standards related to the processes of authorization and accreditation, and the National Qualifications Framework;
- Constant professional development of experts involved in external reviews of educational institutions and programs, and enhancement of the professional development opportunities for the NCEQE staff;
- The annual evaluation of the Center and external international evaluation in line with ESG principles and guidelines; External mechanisms implemented by ENQA, EQAR and WFME;
- Other instruments for evaluation and development of the processes, including the supporting programs from donors and international organizations (World Bank, Asia Development Bank, EU-supported programs, UN Development and UNESCO and other programs).

The management of the Center is obliged to support the internal quality assurance policy and its periodic renewal, considering the needs in-side and out-side of the Center. The QA of the Business Processes of the Center is based on the PDCA cycle model "Plan-Do-Check-Act", supporting consistency, and is cycle-based.

The above-mentioned mechanisms support the involvement of different stakeholders in the NCEQE activities, operate at strategic and operational levels, and their use is based on the data and feedback received from internal and external stakeholders. Until 2019, the NCEQE was using the EFQM Excellence Model to plan, implement, assess, and improve its activities, and to ensure their accountability and effectiveness. This process required the full-fledged involvement of all structural units, and the Agency reached the level "Recognized to Excellence".

During the pandemic, the Center started the distance working and it complicated the implementation of interactive activities of internal QA that were planned in 2020. The management of the Agency decided to search for the QA systems fitting its resources and existing condition. For that purpose, the experience of the ENQA member agencies was studied, and their internal QA systems were analyzed. As the preliminary study revealed, some of them were using EFQM and ISO models, and others had PDCA-cycle based internal QA systems.

The Center has decided to elaborate an internal QA system more responding to its strategic and action plans, objectives, resources, monitoring, and evaluation. Finally, the Agency started to use the **CAF (Common Assessment Framework)** system, which was based on EFQM by the European Union, specifically for public organizations. The use of CAF by the public organizations in Georgia was also initiated and supported by the Public Service Development Agency. Furthermore, the implementation of CAF is not connected to the need for financial resources, which is crucial for non-for-profit organizations.

In 2023, the Center started the implementation of CAF for the first time. The sessions of the self-evaluations were carried out with the structural units of the Center. Till the end of the year, a minimum of 13 small and medium-size development-oriented projects must be implemented with active involvement of the staff. This is also well-illustrated in the NCEQE [action plan](#) (activity 1.5.2.).

Furthermore, the Center annually conducts the **consumers' satisfaction survey**. This survey aims to study the quality of the satisfaction of the service receivers, identification of the drawbacks and development of the respective recommendations. For instance, based on the customer satisfaction survey, the improvement of the Center web page was revealed as a need. Respectively, with the financial support of the EU-funded Twinning project, a new and more customer-friendly NCEQE website was developed. Also, to make the process flexible and customer-oriented, the NCEQE improved the process of delivering the services (book an appointment, update service payment, etc.).

The Center intensively holds different **information meetings and training** to support the internal quality assurance development process. Moreover, it evaluates the experts and accordingly, plans their professional development. The respective reports on the evaluation of expert pool exist and further used for the planning of the training.

The Agency regularly **collects and analyzes the feedback** from the stakeholders and uses it for the further improvement of its internal processes. The feedback is collected through the working groups, conferences, site visits or other events where the stakeholders mainly participate. Also, after the end of each site visit, the Agency receives feedback from an expert panel, HEI, the Center representative. All the parties involved in the process are evaluated. Moreover, the Agency ensures the publicity of the information to all interested parties regarding any working dimension of it. Also, HEIs requested from the expert pool to indicate the rationale for not taking the highlights of the argumentative position into account. Upon their request, a special section was added to the reporting form.

The Agency has the **Code of Ethics** and Conduct for its staff, as well as for the members of the expert pool. These documents are key to regulate the conduct, preserve the reputation and avoid conflict of interests. The labour relations at the NCEQE are based on the principle of equality, and no type of discrimination is accepted. The Code of Ethics for the NCEQE staff is available on the Center [official website](#). The Code of Ethics for the Expert Pool is available [here](#).

Also, since 2015, **Internal Audit** has been helping the NCEQE to accomplish its objectives by bringing a systematic, disciplined approach to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of risk management, internal control, and governance processes.

The Internal Audit Department has been conducting financial, operational and compliance and performance<sup>12</sup> audits, as well as information security management systems (ISMS) audit for the last seven years. The audits provide reasonable assurance that the financial statements were free from material misstatement or fraud. Internal audit department systematically monitors implementation of the recommendations given because of the audits. Recommendations disclosed in reports of the internal audit are continuously considered within the NCEQE to strengthen the system of internal efficiency and effectiveness of work. Furthermore, the Audit Department holds consultations to support the structural units in enhancing the internal processes.

The overall outcome of all above-mentioned audits is to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the financial management and control system, develop recommendations to increase the economy, efficiency, and productivity of the Agency's activities, to determine the risks faced by the Agency and assess the quality of their management. The reliability, accuracy, and completeness of financial information, as well as the Agency's assets and other resources are also assessed.

The final output of the Audit Department is then used for further enhancement of the efficiency of the Agency's work.

The **Information Security Management System** represents as a part of the internal quality assurance, as it supports the sustainability of the business process of the Agency, and protection of information and documentation. Accordingly, the Agency has an information Security Manager and Information Security Council. According to the resolution of the Government of Georgia, the Center is a critical information security entity of the first category. In accordance with the system implementation standards, the center has an information security board, policy, asset description methodology. Currently, the work on the description of the assets has been completed, and the work on the methodology of risk management and identification of risks is underway and will be finalized in 2023.

Also, the Center has the relevant personal information and labour safety policy that serves as the framework for the maintaining high professional standards in terms of data security and improvement of the labour conditions at the Agency. It is worth mentioning that based on the report (2019) of the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, the NCEQE was named among the most accountable and open public institutions.

The internal quality assurance mechanisms of the NCEQE ensure the effective functioning of the Agency and implementation of its activities with the involvement of all interested parties. With the purpose of enhancing the internal quality policy, the Center plans full implementation of the CAF in the upcoming years.

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<sup>12</sup> The Internal Audit of the Center has been implementing the performance audit since 2019. Furthermore, the Center has executed the compliance audit of the monitoring of the Higher Education Institutions.

## ESG Standard 3.7 Cyclical External Review of Agencies

**Standard:** Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

The ENQA conducted the first external review of the NCEQE in 2018, and the experts' report led the ENQA Board to conclude that the NCEQE adheres to the ESG 2015. The NCEQE submitted a follow-up report in 2021, which was approved by the ENQA Board. In 2023, the NCEQE reapplied for the ENQA membership and the EQAR listing. Additionally, the NCEQE has been registered in EQAR since 2019. Cyclical external review and periodical renewal of the ENQA membership is seen as a tool for continuous and sustainable development of the NCEQE.

## 6.Design and Implementation of the Agency's EQA Activities (compliance with Part 2 of the ESG)

### ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of Internal Quality Assurance

**Standard:** External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG

By the Georgian Law on Quality Enhancement, HEIs are subject to external evaluation. Georgia's system of external QA implies authorization and educational program accreditation. Both mechanisms of external QA evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the mechanisms of internal QA and consider the respective outcomes. This is done in number of ways: Firstly, according to authorization and program accreditation standards HEIs are expected to maintain documentation and evidence of reporting on their internal quality assurance processes, including policies, procedures, and guidelines. When undergoing external QA institutions need to provide these documents to demonstrate their internal QA efforts, for maintaining quality of educational provision and overall institutional activities, and how these align with external standards and requirements. Additionally, to showcase the effectiveness of internal processes institutions need to produce regular reports on their internal QA activities, highlighting achievements, improvements made, and areas for development. Secondly, according to external QA standards, HEIs need to conduct self-evaluations to assess effectiveness of their internal QA processes that involves critically analyzing policies and practices by HEI community and where necessary implementing improvement measures. Thirdly, in external QA procedures institutions are expected to demonstrate how they have used feedback from previous external QA processes for improvement.

Referring to the set of standards and guidelines outlined in Part 1 of the ESG 2015, the Center revised the standards of authorization and program accreditation in 2015-2018. Consequently, the standards became more descriptive content-wise and outcome-based. These standards create the common framework for quality assurance and guide the Georgian HEIs to engage their communities in internal quality assurance processes, with the purpose of ensuring recognition, transparency, trust and accountability.



The authorization standards were fundamentally revised in 2017 and are defined by the Authorization Charter<sup>13</sup>. As for the accreditation standards, they were also completely revised in 2018 and are defined by the Accreditation Charter<sup>14</sup>. Later in 2022, after introducing the cluster accreditation, the standards were further revised, aimed at continuous development of external QA. The following key revisions were developed in the standards:

- Considering the cluster accreditation, the specific evaluation criteria and indicators of the standards were elaborated. The revised standards ensure seeing holistic context in evaluation, considering the connections between the educational programs, both vertically (BA, MA, PhD) and horizontally (e.g., PhD programs only, MA programs only, or BA programs only);
- The structure of the certain standards was revised leading to grouping of similar components, and equal number of components in various accreditation standards, ensuring greater consistency of assessment;
- The revised standards cover quality aspects of distance/remote teaching & learning;
- The qualification requirements and mechanisms of professional development of supervisors of master's/doctoral theses have been further developed.

The procedures for the defense of master's and doctoral theses have been further developed. Introduction of the cluster accreditation of educational programs was backed by the analysis of the areas of further improvement identified in the accreditation process, and international practice of program accreditation. Furthermore, the feedback from the HEIs and the analysis of the previous system have been considered.

One of the outcomes of this analysis served as the basis for program accreditation to become mandatory for all types of educational programs. Before 2023, accreditation was mandatory only for the regulated professions, doctoral and Georgian language training programs. Now, the cluster accreditation implies the evaluation of an individual program as well as the cluster evaluation including maximum 8 educational programs.

This table<sup>15</sup> below demonstrates the alignment of the authorization and accreditation standards and procedures with the ESG Part 1 requirements:

ESG Standards	Standards for Institutional Authorization	Standards for Programme Accreditation/Joint Programme Accreditation
<b>1.1 Policy for quality</b>	<b>2.Organizational structure and management of HEI</b> 2.2 Internal quality assurance mechanisms 2.3 Observing principle of ethics and Integrity	<b>1. Educational Programme Objectives, Learning Outcomes and their Compliance with the Programme</b> 1.1 Programme Objectives 1.2 Programme Learning Outcomes

<sup>13</sup> [Sublegal Acts](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Sublegal Acts](#)

<sup>15</sup> In the table, the standards are indicated in bold.

assurance		1.3 Evaluation Mechanism of the Programme Learning Outcomes 1.4 Structure and Content of Educational Programme <b>5. Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities</b>
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	<b>2. Organizational structure and management of HEI</b> 2.2 Internal quality assurance mechanisms <b>3. Educational programmes</b> 3.1 Design and development of educational programmes 3.2 Structure and content of educational programmes	<b>1. Educational Programme Objectives, Learning Outcomes and their Compliance with the Programme</b> 1.1. Programme Objectives 1.2. Programme Learning Outcomes 1.4 Structure and Content of Educational Programme <b>2. Methodology and Organization of Teaching, Adequacy of Evaluation of Programme Mastering</b> 2.2 The Development of Practical, Scientific/Research/Creative/Performance and Transferable Skills <b>5. Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities</b> 5.3 Programme monitoring and periodic review
1.3 Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment	<b>3. Educational programmes</b> 3.1 Design and development of educational programmes 3.2 Structure and content of educational programmes 3.3 Assessment of learning outcomes <b>5. Students and their support services</b> 5.2 Student support services	<b>2. Methodology and Organization of Teaching, Adequacy of Evaluation of Programme Mastering</b> 2.3 Teaching and Learning Methods 2.4 Student Evaluation <b>3. Student Achievements and Individual Work with Them</b> 3.1 Student Consulting and Support Services
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	<b>2. Organizational structure and management of HEI</b> 2.2 Internal Quality Assurance Mechanism <b>3. Educational programmes</b> 3.2 Structure of Educational Programme <b>5. Students and their support services</b> 5.1. The Rule for obtaining and changing Student status, the recognition of education, and student rights	<b>1. Educational Programme Objectives, Learning Outcomes and their Compliance with the Programme</b> 1.2. Programme Learning Outcomes 1.3 Evaluation Mechanism of the Programme Learning Outcomes <b>2. Methodology and Organization of Teaching, Adequacy of Evaluation of Programme Mastering</b> 2.1 Programme Admission Preconditions <b>5. Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities</b> 5.1. Internal Quality Evaluation
1.5 Teaching staff	<b>4. Staff of the HEI</b> 4.1. Staff Management 4.2. Academic/Scientific and Invited Staff Workload <b>6. Research, development and/or other creative work</b> 6.1. Research Activities	<b>4. Providing Teaching Resources</b> 4.1 Human Resources 4.2 Qualification of Supervisors of Master's and Doctoral Student 4.3 Professional Development of Academic, Scientific and Invited Staff

<b>1.6 Learning resources and student support</b>	<b>4. Staff of the HEI</b> 4.1. Staff Management <b>5. Students and their support services</b> 5.2 Student support services <b>7. Material, information and financial resources</b> 7.1 Material resources 7.2 Library resources 7.3 Information Resources 7.4 Financial Resources	<b>3. Student Achievements and Individual Work with Them</b> 3.1 Student Consulting and Support Services <b>4. Providing Teaching Resources</b> 4.1 Human Resources 4.4 Material Resources 4.5 Programme/Faculty/School Budget and Programme Financial Sustainability
<b>1.7 Information management</b>	<b>2. Organizational structure and management of HEI</b> 2.1 Organizational structure and management 2.2 Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms <b>3. Educational programmes</b> 3.1 Design and development of educational programmes 3.2 Structure of Educational Programme <b>5. Students and their support services</b> 5.2 Student support services Self-evaluation report template	<b>1. Educational Programme Objectives, Learning Outcomes and their Compliance with the Programme</b> 1.3 Evaluation Mechanism of the Programme Learning Outcomes <b>5. Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities</b> 5.1 Internal Quality Evaluation 5.2 External Quality Evaluation 5.3 Programme Monitoring and Periodic Review Self-evaluation report template
<b>1.8 Public information</b>	<b>3. Educational programmes</b> 3.2 Structure of Educational Programme 3.3 Assessment of learning outcomes <b>5. Students and their support services</b> 5.1. The Rule for obtaining and changing Student status, the recognition of education, and student rights 5.2 Student support services <b>7. Material, information and financial resources</b> 7.3 Information Resources	<b>1. Educational Programme Objectives, Learning Outcomes and their Compliance with the Programme</b> 1.1 Programme Objectives 1.2 Programme Learning Outcomes 1.4 Structure and Content of Educational Programme <b>2. Methodology and Organization of Teaching, Adequacy of Evaluation of Programme Mastering</b> 2.1 Programme Admission Preconditions 2.4 Student Evaluation
<b>1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes</b>	<b>2. Organizational structure and management of HEI</b> 2.2 Internal Quality Assurance Mechanism <b>3. Educational programmes</b> 3.1 Design and development of educational 3.2 Structure of Educational Programme 3.3 Assessment of learning outcomes	<b>1. Educational Programme Objectives, Learning Outcomes and their Compliance with the Programme</b> 1.1 Programme Objectives 1.3 Evaluation Mechanism of the Programme Learning Outcomes 1.4 Structure and Content of Educational Programme <b>2. Methodology and Organization of Teaching, Adequacy of Evaluation of Programme Mastering</b> 2.4 Student Evaluation <b>5. Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities</b> 5.1 Internal Quality Evaluation 5.2 External Quality Evaluation

		5.3 Programme Monitoring and Periodic Review
<b>1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance</b>	Charter of Authorization (99/n) Article 79 Self-Evaluation Report Template	<b>5. Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities</b> 5.2. External Quality Evaluation Charter of Accreditation (65/n), Article 27 <sup>6</sup> Self-Evaluation Report Template

For the detailed explanation of the consideration of ESG Part 1 in the NCEQE’s QA Standards and Procedures see - Annex 9.

To enhance effectiveness of external QA in addressing considerations of internal QA, the NCEQE is planning to continue collaboration and engagement with HEIs by applying regular feedback mechanisms and inviting institutions to provide input on revision of QA framework and processes. The NCEQE is also planning to continue supporting HEIs in undertaking responsibility for QA through capacity-building and provision of resources/workshops on internal quality assurance. This involves and is not limited to encouraging institutions to view external QA as an opportunity for learning and development and as catalyst for positive change, rather than a purely evaluative process.

Currently, the Center has been working on updating the authorization standards. The proper changes are triggered due to the outcome of the reform of cluster accreditation standards and procedures, as well as the lessons learned from the first cycle of authorization (2018-2023). Furthermore, it is planned to specify the authorization and accreditation criteria and evaluation scale for newly established HEIs and programs that will be more relevant for their assessment.

It is noteworthy that the Center has currently been working on the development of the quality assurance standards for doctoral educational programs, and the respective framework document has already been drafted.

## ESG Standard 2.2 Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose

**Standard:** External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

The NCEQE leads the development and implementation of external quality assurance standards and procedures. As it was mentioned previously, the NCEQE administers the following main external QA activities – authorization of HEIs and educational program accreditation, the accreditation of joint programs. Besides, as part of the Authorization/Accreditation procedures the NCEQE administers activities such as increasing student quota, international accreditation, and follow-up procedures. All the activities are based on the standards and procedures for authorization of educational institutions and accreditation of educational programs. These processes are regulated by the Orders of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia,

(Respectively: the Authorization Charter, Order #99/n, 01/10/2010 and the Accreditation Charter, Order #65/n, 04/05/2011 - Annex – 3 and Annex - 4).

The primary aim of the mentioned procedures is to support the enhancement of internal quality assurance mechanisms within the HEIs, foster a QA culture, and promote the overall development of HEIs. The Authorization and Accreditation standards are fully aligned with ESG 2015 and provide flexibility to HEIs, allowing them to focus not only on complying with the standards but also on continuous enhancement.

In the implementation and development of EQA processes mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Center shares the values and principles of ESG and pays attention to the involvement of stakeholders. Besides, the EQA of higher education system has developed significantly since 2015. The implementation of reforms took place in two stages. In 2015-2018, the reform of the quality assurance system of higher education was carried out, which ensured the introduction of a result-based and development-oriented quality assurance mechanisms.

Based on the analysis of the review of international experience, in 2020, the Center further developed the program accreditation standards and procedures and implemented a model of cluster accreditation. The major developments have been outlined on p. 32 of this SAR. The model of cluster accreditation, appropriate forms, and tools of the cluster accreditation principles along with the evaluation principles were discussed with higher educational institutions, the Ministry of Education and Science and other stakeholders. The process took 2 years before the final model was implemented in 2022. In order to ensure more efficiency and share international experience, international experts from Estonia (HAKA representatives) and Germany (AQAS representatives) were engaged as consultants through a twinning project “Strengthening capacities for quality assurance and governance of qualifications”. With the development of cluster accreditation, the procedures were also reviewed, along with the accreditation fees. The activities of EQA primarily focus on development and are designed to enhance performance of HEIs. Furthermore, to make the procedures more fit for purpose and optimize the workload of HEIs the self-assessment report templates were reviewed and the list of annexes were shortened.

To ensure effectiveness and objectivity of EQA and taking into consideration stakeholders' feedback special culture has been created within the NCEQE that shares following mechanisms and stages:

1. The NCEQE CC is actively involved in the development of EQA procedure and standards. The CC is informed about all the initiatives from the very first stage and their opinion is considered in the process of drafting a document;
2. The NCEQE sends draft documents (before adoption and implementation of new standards and procedures) to all its stakeholders, such as higher education institutions, local and international experts, relevant ministries and regulatory bodies, authorization/accreditation/appeal councils and asks for the feedback which is analyzed and well-grounded suggestions are reflected in draft document. The working groups held in-person meetings before COVID-19 pandemic; however, during the pandemic they worked in an online mode; after the pandemic a hybrid-model was implemented to ensure flexibility of

working groups. Throughout the discussion the Center states to the stakeholders which comments have been considered in the draft document and provides detailed evidence-based arguments why certain comments and suggestions have not been reflected in the draft document;

3. After considering the feedback from the stakeholders and developing the final draft document, it is once again sent to the above-mentioned stakeholders so that final details are double-checked. The stakeholders have additional time to provide the final feedback on the draft document;
4. Piloting and finalization of documents is an important stage. The NCEQE conducts pilot institutional and/or program evaluations following the finalization of regulations on updated quality mechanisms;
5. The draft document and results from piloting are discussed at the conference organized by the Center. The Representatives of the higher education system attend this conference;
6. Before the final document is drawn up, the draft document is reviewed by the Center's CC;
7. At the final stage, the final document is approved by the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia.

When using such a methodology, the main focus is to ensure fitness of revisions in QA standards to its aims and objectives. Engagement with stakeholders also ensures that there is a match between the NCEQE and the stakeholders on the aims and outcomes of QA processes and these are clear for institutions.

It is worth mentioning that the Center has developed a guideline for higher education institutions on the development of the self-evaluation process and preparation for authorization<sup>16</sup>. A similar [guideline](#) is drawn up for the self-evaluation of the accreditation process. These guidelines emphasize the involvement of stakeholders in self-evaluation. When using such a methodology, the main focus is to encourage institutions to develop QA culture and to strengthen self-evaluation and reflection. Self-evaluation reports provided by the HEIs, and follow-up activities and their content allow the HEIs to reflect on their own development and explicitly demonstrate progress to the Center and the society.

The NCEQE conducts training series for HEIs to help them in building their capacity to better prepare for external evaluation and improve their internal quality assurance system. In 2019-2022 the Center introduced a needs-based approach so that at the beginning of each academic year the Georgian HEIs are provided with the list of relevant topics concerning quality assurance and management and administration issues in higher education. After having received feedback from the HEIs, the Center identifies top priorities, and organizes a series of workshops and training to support QA culture development at the HEIs. In order to support the implementation of cluster accreditation model, 24 training courses were delivered for all the HEIs. Additionally, up to 30 trainings/workshops were offered to all the HEIs (overall number of participants was 4800) on various topics (e.g., strategic development, internal quality assurance mechanisms, assessment of learning outcomes, defining and elaboration of learning outcomes, development of doctoral studies, etc.) in higher education. The

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<sup>16</sup> [Guidebooks](#)

Center tries to engage international experts to provide training sessions for the HEI representatives and the staff of the Center. e.g., in 2022 through TAIEX project a two-day workshop was offered to the HEIs and the Center staff on quality assurance trends and practices and quality audit<sup>17</sup>. 16 trainings/workshops were offered to Authorization/Accreditation/Appeal Councils in 2019-2023. These training series, along with all other activities by the NCEQE aims to support the development of internal QA culture and consider the introduction of quality audit model at the HEIs to make it more fit for purpose. Furthermore, in 2023 the NCEQE will host an international expert to conduct the training on effective planning of self-evaluation process for HEIs undergoing through reauthorization process in 2024. Currently, the NCEQE is working on the development on the guidelines for fostering academic freedom and academic integrity for HEIs.

All the above-described initiatives give grounds to state that all EQA activities of the Center are clearly defined and ensure the publicity of the Center activities. Furthermore, the Center tries to ensure flexibility and give the institutions a chance to demonstrate the effectiveness of the IQA.

Additionally, as a result of the ENQA recommendations, specific initiatives were carried out for determining or increasing student quota. The methodology for determining or increasing student quota was in place by the ENQA evaluation time, still, the methodology was further elaborated and refined to ensure that guidelines are clearer and more specific. The document provides more specific guidance to the parties involved in the evaluation process (HEI, experts, members of the Council) to determine student quota in program/at institution. The guidance explains key indicators the institutions should consider for the methodology of defining student quota and clarifies for experts and Council members how to evaluate the effectiveness of the methodology. Also, key indicators ensure provision of appropriate teaching, learning and research environment for the respective student quota. The guidance is available [here](#).

Accordingly, through the refined document the HEIs, the Council members, the experts have better awareness of the procedures and criteria based on which increasing and determining student quota occurs.

In accordance with another recommendation by the ENQA, the amendment in Accreditation Charter (Article 28) was introduced to specify the procedure for applying for recognition of accreditation granted by a foreign QA organization. Besides, the rules and conditions for follow-up procedures were defined. Namely, the Center is authorized to conduct a case-based monitoring in accordance with the rules established by the Accreditation Charter, with a prior agreement with the foreign organization. The accreditation report of the expert panel developed through a case-based monitoring is sent to respective foreign organization and the HEI. The HEI is obliged to notify the Center about the information on the results of the follow-up evaluation conducted by a foreign organization. Besides, in 2022 the procedure for recognition of accreditation of medical doctor programs was specified. The recognition of accreditation of medical doctor programs follows a separate regulation – the foreign agency granting accreditation should be the ENQA member, registered

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<sup>17</sup> TAIEX Experts Workshop

with EQAR and recognized by the World Federation of Medical Education (WFME). The Center developed the guideline<sup>18</sup> to ensure the cohesion of the procedure. At the current stage, institutions are running 10 programs that have been granted accreditation by a foreign organization and the center has recognized accreditation of the above-mentioned programs.

Based on the ENQA recommendation, The Accreditation Charter specifies that the NCEQE uses the European approach to quality assurance of joint programs. The procedure for accreditation of joint programs is defined in detail in the Accreditation Charter (Article 27<sup>7</sup>). According to the Accreditation Charter, approaches which are compatible with the EHEA should be employed in the process of accreditation of joint programs. An accreditation application for a joint program submitted to the Center should be accompanied with the agreement between the HEIs, and this agreement should be agreed with the Center prior to the submission of the accreditation application. The areas and specific details which should be covered in the agreement between the partner universities are defined in the Order №74 of the Director of the Center (3/02/2017)<sup>19</sup>. In addition, the guidebook for accreditation experts was developed by the NCEQE which clearly describes the steps for evaluating the joint programs in Georgia. In order to consider the European approach, according to the accreditation procedures, an international expert from the relevant country (the country where the foreign partner university is located) is engaged in the evaluation process as the chair of the expert panel.

All the above-mentioned procedures consider the requirements of the standard which defines an obligation to fit the purpose to achieve the aims and objectives of quality assurance and engage stakeholders in designing and continuous improvement of QA processes. All these EQA procedures are publicly available on the NCEQE website in the Georgian and English languages.

It worth mentioning that after development and implementation the national legislative framework for online teaching/learning the Center will actively start working on elaboration the external QA mechanisms for online/blended learning. Additionally, by the end of the current QA cycle the NCEQE plans to evaluate the existing QA methodologies against the defined aims and objectives to identify any gaps or misalignments that will need to be addressed. This analysis will serve as a baseline for updating/designing a more suitable QA methodology. Also, the center plans to revise the Order №74 of the Director of the Center in order to highlight differences between the partnership agreements on implementing joint programs with local or international HEIs.

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<sup>18</sup> [Forms and Guides ; Recognition of decisions/reviews by foreign agencies](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Sublegal Acts](#)



## ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing Processes

**Standard:** External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

The abovementioned external QA processes of the NCEQE are determined by the Law on Quality Enhancement and the further detailed standards and procedures are outlined in the Charters of Authorization and Accreditation. All these documents are publicly available on the [NCEQE web page](#) and the Legislative Herald of Georgia.

Supplementary resources and guidelines have been developed by the NCEQE to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the external QA procedures. Furthermore, the official web page of the NCEQE has a special informational section dedicated to HE QA, where the essential information is available to all stakeholders.

According to the Accreditation/Authorization Charters, the process of accreditation/authorization comprises the following compulsory stages:

- Submitting an authorization/accreditation application;
- Recognition of an educational institution as a seeker of authorization of educational institution/accreditation of respective educational program;
- Creation of authorization/accreditation Expert Panel;
- Preliminary study of the self-evaluation report and the attached documentation and elaboration of the authorization/accreditation/ site visit agenda;
- Implementation of the authorization/accreditation site visit;
- Elaboration of the draft report of the authorization/ accreditation expert panel and submitting it to the Center;
- Introduction of the draft report of the authorization/accreditation expert panel to the institution;
- Submission of the argumentative position on factual circumstances reflected in the report of authorization/accreditation expert panel by the institution to the Center;
- Elaboration of the final report by the authorization/accreditation expert panel and submitting it to the Center;
- Introducing the report of the authorization/accreditation expert panel to the institution;
- Sending an authorization/accreditation application, the final report of the authorization/accreditation expert panel and the argumentative position submitted to the Center by the institution on the draft report of the panel to the members of the Authorization/Accreditation Council;
- Oral hearing on authorization/accreditation issue and decision-making by the Authorization/Accreditation Council;
- Publication of a substantiated decision, minutes of the Council and the final report of the Expert panel by the Center.

The Accreditation Charter<sup>20</sup> states that HEI has the right to request from the Center to hold a preparatory meeting a month prior to the submission of the accreditation application. In case of the institutional authorization<sup>21</sup>, HEI may request the preparatory meeting three months prior to the submission of the authorization application. The preparatory meeting can be done both in-person or in an online mode. Generally, the preparatory meeting covers the following topics:

- Planning and implementation of the self-evaluation process;
- Planning and implementation of the authorization/accreditation site-visit;
- Definition of authorization/accreditation standards and procedures.

The process of authorization and program accreditation starts with submission of an application which includes submission of self-evaluation reports and the annexes defined by the self-evaluation reports. The relevant self-evaluation [forms of individual/cluster programme accreditation](#) and [authorization](#) are publicly available on the webpage of the Center, and all of them are approved by the Director of the Center<sup>22</sup>. The template of the self-evaluation report includes the list of the annexes that should also be attached to the application. Additionally, the templates provide information for the HEIs which annexes and documents should be translated into English.

After the submission of the documents, the Center studies the compatibility of the documents to the formal procedures defined by the Authorization/Accreditation Charters. If compatibility is defined, the HEI is recognized as a seeker of accreditation or authorization and a relevant formal document is issued to which invoice for authorization/accreditation fee is attached. After the invoice has been paid, the Order of the Director of the Center is issued on creation of authorization/accreditation panel members.

Site-visit is a requirement of the authorization/accreditation process<sup>23</sup>. The duration of the site visit is defined on an individual basis referring to each HEI and educational programs, including the criteria such as specifics, location, resources of HEI/HE programs, and quantity of the programs grouped in the cluster. Accordingly, the authorization visit typically lasts for 3-5 days, and accreditation of HE programs (programs in clusters and joint programs) – 2-4 days. The technical specificities of the site visit are included in the Charters for accreditation/authorization, [Rule of Experts'](#) (Order N964009) and [guidebooks](#) and are publicly available. The authorization/accreditation panel consists of representatives of HEIs, international experts, student representatives, employers, and in specific cases, representatives of relative professional bodies or unions, and in case of accreditation, higher education program experts is added to the expert panel. International experts chair

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<sup>20</sup> **The Charter of Accreditation** Chapter V, Article 19<sup>1</sup>. This was amended in 2022 to the Accreditation Charter.

<sup>21</sup> **Charter of Authorization** Chapter I, Article 4, Paragraph 4

<sup>22</sup> Accreditation Charter Chapter V, Article 21 and Charter of Authorization Chapter IV, Article 64,

<sup>23</sup> Accreditation Charter Chapter V, Article 26 and Charter of Authorization Chapter IV, Article 70

authorization/accreditation panels, and all the evaluations are conducted through site visits, except for special occasions, like COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, in 2020-2022, the external QA had to be modified to reflect the specific requirements for the pandemic. The amendments were introduced in Authorization and Accreditation Charters and based on these amendments, the evaluations were conducted in an online mode, or hybrid mode, including online sessions, and in some cases, through site visits. During the Pandemic, authorization of the HEIs always included site-visit of the experts and the same approach was applied, for example, in case of the evaluation of MD programs.

All evaluation processes are coordinated by the HE QA department staff of the NCEQE who ensures that the process runs smoothly, and in case of necessity, they provide additional support and clarification to authorization/accreditation panel members on the Georgian legislation and other QA regulations. The NCEQE staff member coordinating the evaluation process ensures coherence and consistency of approaches of experts in relation to program/institution evaluation. The same approach is applied to report writing.

The preparation of the report is a critical stage of the authorization/accreditation process. The report forms are approved by the orders of the Director of the Center, and they consist of several parts: the general information on the educational Institution/program/cluster of educational program(s), executive summary, and compliance of the institution/program/cluster of the programs with authorization/accreditation standards (see detailed information in chapter 2.6).

The report is an outcome of the examination of the self-evaluation report, the attached documents to the self-evaluation report, and a site visit, and it describes the compliance of HEI and the HEI educational programs with the authorization/accreditation standards<sup>24</sup>. The guidebooks of experts provide the information on the methodology for filling the reports.

According to the Authorization/Accreditation Charters, at the initial stage a draft report is developed which should follow the [Rule of Experts](#) which sets out specific requirements towards the report (detailed information can be found in 2.6). If the draft report is in full compliance with the criteria determined for the report, the draft report is sent to the HEI under evaluation to double-check if the draft report does not contain any factual inaccuracies.

The argumentative position of the HEI is sent to the expert panel, and the panel analyzes the arguments, accepts, or rejects them, and submits the final report to the NCEQE. The final report provides detailed explanation why the arguments were/were not accepted by the panel.

The decisions of Authorization/Accreditation Councils concerning HEIs/programs are based on the following evidence, documents, data analysis:

- Self-assessment report of the HEI, the submitted documents;
- Argumentative position of the HEI;

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<sup>24</sup> Accreditation Charter Chapter V, Article 27<sup>1</sup> and Charter of Authorization Chapter IV, Article 73,

- Final report of the panel (includes evidence gathered through self-assessment report, submitted documents and site-visits);
- Public/oral hearing.

The Authorization/Accreditation Charters provide a detailed description of public/oral hearings. The Council members assume responsibility to study all the documents concerning each individual evaluation before the public/oral hearing, identify all the issues that need additional clarification and be actively involved in the discussion. In case of need, the Council members have the right to request additional documents as evidence. The members of the expert panel and representatives of an HEI participate in the public hearing. The NCEQE representatives also attend hearings. During the hearing, the Chair of the council is leading the hearing, and the Authorization/Accreditation Councils are responsible for clarifying all issues related to the decision-making. The oral hearing is public, and it can be conducted in online and offline formats. Decisions and minutes of the Authorization/Accreditation Councils along with the review reports are published on the NCEQE's web page.

The Authorization/Accreditation Council makes a decision based on the above-mentioned evidence. The Figure 1 below outlines the possible decisions of Accreditation/Authorization councils based on the compliance of institutions/programs with the authorization/accreditation standards. The compliance levels are detailed defined in the respective charters.

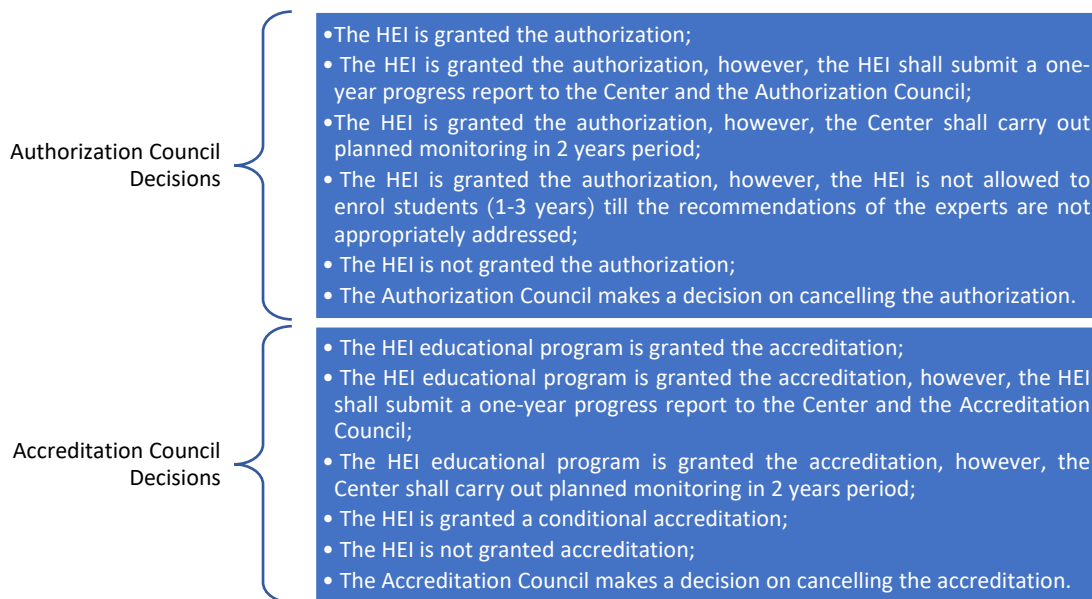


Figure 1. Authorization/Accreditation Council Decisions

The Follow-up procedures assess the implementation of recommendations received by institutions. The follow-up procedures give an opportunity to HEIs to demonstrate the progress, and to plan further steps in terms of institutional/program development.

There are follow-up procedures listed below:

- 1-year progress report based on the Council's recommendations;
- monitoring (planned or case-based);
- 3-year progress report.

The Authorization (Article - 79<sup>1</sup>)/Accreditation (Article 27<sup>6</sup>) Charters specify the procedure of assessing one-year progress reports for authorization and accreditation. In follow-up procedures the composition of experts panel includes at least one member from the previous evaluation. The experts' follow-up reports are presented to Authorization/Accreditation Councils. In most cases, 1-year progress reports are assessed on the basis of the HEI documentation by experts, however, the referring to the sense and specifics of the recommendations, a site-visit could be organized, and the respective practice exists. The Councils hold public discussion of the reports provided by authorization/accreditation experts. The Authorization/Accreditation Council either accepts a one-year progress report or requests the NCEQE to carry out a monitoring visit if all the recommendations are not fulfilled.

The Authorization (Article 88)/Accreditation (Article 31) Charters define basis for planned and case-based follow-up procedures. After the ENQA recommendations in 2018 differences between planned and case-based monitoring were defined in the above-mentioned charters. In the Charters approaches of assembling expert panels for follow-up procedures have been defined. These approaches depend on the scope and the type of monitoring.

According to Authorization/Accreditation Charters, planned monitoring can be arranged in accordance with the Authorization/Accreditation Council decisions or the decision by the NCEQE. The NCEQE decision on planned monitoring is based on the pre-determined criteria (for example: recommendations of the Councils, outcome of the previous evaluations, quantity of the complaints from the stakeholders, mobility data of student and staff, etc.) of choosing institutions or educational programs to be monitored. The NCEQE is obliged to inform respective HEIs at the beginning of each year on the upcoming planned monitoring and on the criteria based on which the monitoring will be carried out.

Authorization/Accreditation Charters define the conditions and the specificity of case-based monitoring. Case-based monitoring is conducted based on the complaints received from the students, members of the staff of HEIs, or other stakeholders. The complaint can be made in relation to possible violation of authorization and/or accreditation standards by the institution. The NCEQE has developed a procedure for reviewing these types of complaints for better guidance from the relevant parties. The case-based monitoring can also be conducted based on the decision of council or the NCEQE initiative. Moreover, in order to enhance the transparency of the follow-up procedures, the NCEQE has developed a Handbook for Follow-up procedures<sup>25</sup>.

In order to reflect the recommendation from the ENQA, the NCEQE has a clearly defined **Follow-up procedures** which assess the implementation of recommendations received by institutions. The follow-up procedures give an

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<sup>25</sup> [Guides](#) ; [Forms](#)

opportunity to both the Center and the HEIs to see the results of the authorization/accreditation process on the progress made, and to plan further steps in terms of institutional and program development. This process also helps institutions to make publicly (including community members of HEIs) visible how the quality culture is nurtured. The follow-up procedures allow institutions to ensure the involvement of all stakeholders in the ongoing organizational development process. Also, the Authorization (Article 85)/Accreditation (Article 29) Charters were amended to define the procedure for evaluating three-years progress reports for programs and institutions. These reports are evaluated by experts' panels and the feedback is communicated to HEI and the NCEQE. It should be noted that evaluation of the three-year interim self-evaluation report is developmental, the results are not reviewed by the Authorization/Accreditation Councils. Such procedures were introduced to facilitate self-reflection by the institution in interim period, on strengths and areas of development of institutionalization and internalization of robust QA mechanisms at the HEI. The NCEQE is identifying the strengths and areas of development in interim period, on micro and macro levels (at institutional level and systems level) through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of three-year interim reports has been conducted by the NCEQE in 2023 and 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., Based on the recommendation of the Council, if HEIs/programs have undergone through the planned monitoring after granting authorization/accreditation, they will not be required to submit the interim three-years report. Additionally, the terms for presenting the interim self-evaluation report were determined by the Order of the Director of the NCEQE.

Apart from authorization/accreditation and follow-up procedures outlined above, Authorization (Article 91)/Accreditation (Article 27<sup>10</sup>) Charters also define the procedures for increasing student quotas for HEIs in general as well as for medical doctor programs in case of program accreditation. In both cases the application for increasing the student quota is submitted to the NCEQE and application forms are approved by the Director of the NCEQE. Panel of reviewers study the application as well as the HEI's methodology of determining the maximum number of students of the higher educational institution/Medical Doctor educational program, conduct a site visit at the HEI and provide a final report, based on which the Authorization/Accreditation Council makes the final decision whether HEI is granted higher student quota for the institution or Medical Doctor program. Following the ENQA recommendations, in the Handbook for Increasing Student Quota, for the HEIs, Council members, and the experts more specific [information/guidelines](#) is provided concerning the criteria for determining or increasing student quota. The newly created document provides advice on key aspects to focus on in assessment processes in accordance with the Medicines Sectoral Benchmark Document. A detailed description is provided on the above page.

International accreditation of education Program of HEIs operating abroad was added to the Accreditation Charter (Article 31<sup>2)</sup> in 2022 giving the Center authority to conduct program evaluation abroad and grant accreditation. For this purpose, an agreement is concluded between the Center and the institution, which defines the rights and responsibilities of the parties. After receiving the application, the Center contacts the QA Agency of the respective country<sup>26</sup>. The review panel will have an international chair as well as Georgian colleagues and a member from the QA agency's pool of experts based in the same country as the institution comes from, including a student and employer member.

It worth mentioning, that the Center plans to further develop the guidebooks on EQA to enhance their usefulness and reflect current changes in legislation and methodologies.

## ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts

**Standard:** External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

The NCEQE has a pool of reviewers in order to carry out external QA mechanisms. Before 2022, the selection of experts was regulated by the order of the Director of the Center №170, and it was including selection the experts of all levels of education. In 2022 the Rule was amended and the rule for selection of the experts for HE was developed separately. Now, the selection of expert panel for program accreditation and authorization is regulated by the Rule on Selection of Experts for Authorization of Higher Education Institutions and Accreditation of Higher Education Programs, their Activities, Suspension and Termination of Membership of Expert Pool Order №964009 of the Director of National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement, August 30, 2022 (hereinafter, "[Rule of Experts](#)") (See Annex 10.). Experts for the pool are selected based on predetermined criteria which are part of the rules of experts. The pool of experts consists of different stakeholders, including field experts, students, employers, international experts, and higher education program experts. Since 2018 international experts act as chairs of authorization committees; since 2018 international experts act as chairs of accreditation committee for medical education program; since 2022 international experts got engaged in the evaluation of all regulated and doctoral educational programs. In order to increase the engagement of international experts in the evaluation process, since January the 1st, 2023, every evaluation of program is chaired by an international expert (except - Georgian language preparation, Teacher Training and Veterinary Training 60 credits educational programs). It should be noted that the number of the employers' representatives in the expert pool increased from 44 in 2018 to 131 in 2023, and the number of the international experts' representatives increased from 212 in 2018 to 250 in 2023. The number of experts participating in evaluations depends on the number of applications received by the NCEQE annually.

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<sup>26</sup> If there are several QA agencies operating in a state, the NCEQE contacts the Agency which has long-standing collaboration experience with a HEI.

Authorization and accreditation experts are selected through a permanent committee, appointed by the Director of the NCEQE. The committee consists of the NCEQE staff from different departments. They review the documentation of the experts, conduct interviews, and make the final decision by the majority of the votes. The final decision of the committee is approved by the Director of the Center.

Once the successful applicant becomes an expert and submits required documents to the Center, they are added to the database, available on the platform – [experts.eqe.ge](https://experts.eqe.ge). The platform is used to manage the work of experts, it was launched in 2022, and it allows the NCEQE employees to plan a site visit, appoint experts with relevant qualification within the panel, see their availability or an overlap with other QA procedures, their past workload or frequency of being involved in external QA evaluations. The platform helps avoid conflict of interest while appointing the expert for the specific review. For this purpose, the HE QA department employees usually check the Quality Management System (QMS) database, provided by the LEPL - Education Management Information System (EMIS) to identify the recent contract involvement with any other HEI in Georgia. Furthermore, experts are aware about the Code of Ethics for Experts and a special video is available on the [webpage](#) of the NCEQE.

In order to constantly update the pool of experts with relevant expertise, the NCEQE conducts selection of both local and international experts in various fields of study. International experts should have proficiency in English language and have previous work experience with their local or international QA agencies as a member of the review panel assessing higher educational institutions or educational programs. Other than the international call, the NCEQE exercises a case-based approach and might reach out to peer ENQA-registered QA agencies. English language guidelines and video tutorials are [available](#) for international experts to be aware of the local standards and legislative context in the country well in advance before the site visit.

Experts are independent from their institutions, the NCEQE and other organizations at each step of the assessment procedure and are provided with updated consultancy, guidelines, and other support materials by the agency's HE QA team representatives through training modules developed by the Center. The main aim of the capacity building activities for experts is to ensure standardization and consistency of the evaluation process itself. During 2019 and 2023, the NCEQE offered regular training to experts on QA standards and procedures and on the revised National Qualifications Framework. It is worth mentioning that in the period of 2019-2023, the NCEQE organized up to 90 training series for local experts, covering roughly 600 of them (due to global pandemic most of the training were delivered in an online format in 2020-2021). Furthermore, in the newly adopted revised Rule of Experts' it was determined that new members added to the expert pool may be initially involved in the evaluation process as observers, which will allow them to observe the evaluation process. With the mentioned change, the new members of the pool of experts will observe and analyze the evaluation process and its features before joining the evaluation process. One more change regulates the experts' work more clearly. According to the 2022 amendments in the Rule of Experts', roles and responsibilities of employer and student experts are given more clearly. Furthermore, the NCEQE organized international PLA activities for its pool of experts in the framework of the



[EDU-LAB project](#) in collaboration with the Alumni Association of the International Center of Education. These sessions aimed to provide opportunity for professional development to Authorization and Accreditation experts.

Additionally, the training module was developed specifically for student experts on QA standards and students' role in QA, in collaboration with the European Students' Union (ESU). This training aimed to enhance the skills and knowledge of student experts in relation to students' role in QA. It should also be noted, that due to partnering with various Erasmus+ research and capacity building projects and being a member of several European or international associations and working groups, the NCEQE HE QA team is equipped with the latest external QA tools and best practices that are systematically shared with the agency's pool members.

A recent shift towards cluster accreditation allowed the NCEQE to seek for and offer joint training to existing and newly selected experts in a more coherent and structured way, since year by year special focus is placed on specific fields of study (Humanities, Arts, Security Services, etc.). An annual certification process is being administered for the expert pool members who would like to be involved in the cluster accreditation for certain qualifications. In order to support professional development of pool of experts, the Center developed an approach for training which along with providing training sessions presupposes conducting mock interviews so that experts enhance their skills for managing interviews and dealing with the audience. Accordingly, during the certification process registered experts are taking part in mock interviews with HEI representatives (HE QA dept.), preceded by being interviewed regarding the latest developments in their respective scientific fields. Besides, in 2020 the certification of the Experts for Authorization of Higher Education Institutions was held using similar methodology. Along with trainings and opportunities for professional development, the Center employs financial incentives as well. Recently, the NCEQE managed to significantly increase the salary for local experts, emphasizing that their work is very valuable to the agency and the country in general.

To better support the work of expert panel, two meetings of the panel members are organized before the site visit: the 1st as an introductory meeting – where the agency's case coordinators introduce the Georgian and international panel members on current standards, procedure, and legislative developments in the country, provide information regarding institution/program, technical details, timetable for reporting, and help them distribute the workload and draw up the agenda of site-visit. The 2nd one is the preparatory meeting – where the panel members are asked to present their part of the mapping grid, share preliminary impressions with each other, elaborate on the strategy for conducting the site visit and requesting any additional documents needed. When planning a site visit to the institution that runs the MD program, the experts also select the clinics/hospitals they would like to visit as places for clinical training. After the site visit, the panel continues their work within MS OneDrive platform, jointly writing the evaluation report.

It is worth mentioning that the principles of evaluation of experts' activities and questionnaire forms have been updated. The updated procedure and forms allow for comprehensive and complete assessment by all parties participating in the process, both experts and the activity of the center. The aforementioned questionnaires and

their analysis will be used for the purposes of authorization and accreditation processes and the development of experts' activities. In addition to main authorization and accreditation procedures, the agency is now evaluating experts' performance during the follow-up activities too. The results are finalized in the annual report of expert evaluation, which is in turn used for planning future enhancement activities. The experts with permanently high evaluations and positive feedback from different stakeholders are often involved in PLAs co-organized by the NCEQE within Erasmus+ projects.

In order to provide more support to authorization and accreditation experts through their professional development and ensure more accuracy of the evaluation reports developed by them, the Center plans to develop an online training platform. The platform will provide training sessions to experts covering a wide range of urgent issues in quality assurance. Another mechanism that the Center aims to introduce in order to improve the evaluation process and the quality of the report is to add one more day to the evaluation process so that the expert panels have one more additional day after the site visit so that the draft report is developed through more intense cooperative work. One more initiative to sustain professional development is to hold joint training sessions for local and international experts so that the Center ensures that experts develop teamwork and cooperation skills. Besides, international experts will have a better opportunity to increase their awareness of the local culture, legislation, and the specificity of the Georgian system of higher education. The Center also plans to engage international experts in specific follow-up activities based on the complexity of the issue. In addition, the NCEQE will work to increase intensity and consistency of the performance evaluation of the expert pool and subsequent feedback.

## ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for Outcomes

**Standard:** Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

The outcome of external quality assurance (authorization/program accreditation) is subject to the assessment of the panel of external reviewers. Criteria for assessment, comprising of standards to comply with and procedures to follow, are detailed and available for the public in the Georgian and English languages<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, the NCEQE provides guidelines for experts and HEI representatives, explaining the standard and legislative requirements. In addition, the NCEQE assumes responsibility to provide the HEIs with information on the amendments in the legislation on a regular basis. The agency shares the guidelines and amendments with the relevant stakeholders in order to incorporate their feedback and consider the best interests of all parties before the implementation.

The basis for evaluation is a self-assessment document submitted by the HEIs. The agency has recently updated its [self-assessment and evaluation report forms](#) due to the needs of cluster accreditation, which resulted in several novelties: the

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<sup>27</sup> [QA in HE](#)

quantitative data is now separated from the SAR as an annex in spreadsheets format for the ease of data analysis; the reviewers can issue general as well as individual recommendations/suggestions depending whether they are applicable for all the program in the cluster or just one/some of them.

Based on SAR accompanied with authorization/accreditation documents, the data obtained through site-visits the experts panels develop a report which states compliance with the standards. When setting the proper level of compliance towards standards, the panel of experts is guided by the rules defined within the authorization/accreditation charters. The rationale behind the leveling of the compliance grid remains the same. In connection to program accreditation, it should be mentioned that despite having introduced a cluster approach for the groups of programs, each of them is still evaluated separately against the standard requirements. The final decision by the Accreditation Council is separate for each individual program. The logic for compliance with authorization standards is also based on 4-level compliance towards authorization standards.

The detailed explanation of 4-level assessment is given in the [Accreditation Charter](#) (65/n), Article 26<sup>1</sup>) and [Authorization Charter](#) (99/n), Article 71). The review panel members are instructed to cover all criteria under the standard components and issue recommendations which are obligatory to be fulfilled in case any criterion has not been met by the institution. Whereas the recommendations are given, the respective standard components cannot be marked to be “in full compliance” with standard requirements. Once the narrative part is finished and recommendations are given (if applicable), the experts have to provide a list of indicators that were applied as sources for the analysis. They are also authorized to issue suggestions and identify best practices within the report.

The assessment outcomes (report developed by an expert panel, argumentative position by an institution, other materials of assessment) from the authorization/accreditation and their subsequent terms and conditions are discussed among respective council members during a public hearing. The hearings are public, and experts and HEI representatives can attend the hearings, make their statements and answer the questions asked by the council members. The types of council decision are given under chapter 2.3 and described in detail in the accreditation/authorization charters. The Councils make a decision on the basis of consensus, which means the consent of  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the participants.

If the Council has to make a decision in relation to MD program/HEI implementing MD program, along with the authorization/accreditation Council members invited members of the authorization/accreditation Council also participate in decision making. Invited members of the authorization/accreditation Council are selected and appointed according to the same procedures as authorization/accreditation Council members, however the WFME requirements are also taken into account. According to the WFME requirements composition of invited Council should include a student member from medical field,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the invited Council members should have academic background in Medicine,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of them should be doctor practitioners and  $\frac{1}{3}$  should be representatives from medical regulatory bodies. The final decision is made jointly by the authorization/accreditation council members and the invited Council members. The decision is valid if  $\frac{3}{4}$  from each Councils makes a vote.

The Councils' members are authorized to re-consider the evaluation provided in the reports of the experts' panels. The councils assume an obligation to substantiate its final decision. The secretariat's members are in communication with the council members to ensure transparency and thoroughness of the minutes to be published on the agency's webpage. Despite the Councils' final decision, the final report of the experts remains unchanged.

The NCEQE serves as a secretariat for the councils which are independent bodies appointed by the Prime Minister of Georgia. The Accreditation Council members serve for one year, while the Authorization and Appeals Councils serve for two years. It should be stated that the terms for Authorization/Appeal committees were extended to two years based on the recommendations received in 2018 through the ENQA evaluation. As for the Accreditation Council, the term is still one year following the logic that each year there is evaluation of educational programs in different fields of studies, hence the Accreditation Council should have relevant expertise for accurate evaluation.

The agency is always working to ensure that the councils' decisions are impartial and objective, and that conflicts of interest are given due attention. In order to ensure the efficiency of councils the NCEQE provides training to the Councils' members on a regular basis. In addition, the NCEQE has also developed Handbooks<sup>28</sup> for Accreditation and Authorization Councils members that provides methodological guidance to the members of the Council.

As a step to enhance the level of impartiality of the Councils' members and the ENQA's recommendation, in 2020, the methodology of voting has also been changed; namely, the process of voting is closed for the public, and it is not 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 criteria for conflict of interests for Council members. In order to increase the level of awareness and approach cases with more accuracy, from 2020 the NCEQE provides council members with the statement of interest of conflicts and the Councils' members sign the statement by which they assume the responsibility to consider this issue accurately in their work. More specifically, according to the established rules, the members of the Council who represent the institution whose accreditation/institutional evaluation is being discussed by the Council, cannot participate in the discussion on behalf of the institutions they represent. The mentioned methodology contributes to enhancement of the level of Council's independence and increases objectivity and impartiality in decision-making.

In 2020 amendments to the Law on Education Quality Enhancement more focus was made on the protection of students' interests; more specifically, if authorization/accreditation is canceled for a higher educational institution/educational program due to monitoring or authorization/accreditation, the Authorization/Accreditation Councils are eligible to allow HEIs to organize the study

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<sup>28</sup> [Accreditation Council of HE Programms; Authorization Council of HEIs](#)

process in the way that students with active status can complete the semester or academic year at the same institution. In these scenarios, HEIs cannot enroll new students; students are also eligible for external mobility to resume their studies at other HEIs, and the Education Management Information System organizes for students' mobility opportunities.

Also, it is planned to specify the number of times the person can be elected as a member of a council. Furthermore, to address occasional challenges arising due to divergent interpretations of QA standard requirements by the Council members and Experts the NCEQE is planning to continue proactive work on facilitating workshops to ensure consistent decision making.

## ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting

**Standard:** Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

For each evaluation expert panel are obliged to prepare a report based on the self-evaluation of the institution/program, additional documentation and evidence revealed during the site-visit. The forms of the reports are approved by the decree of the Director of the NCEQE (reports are published on the website of the NCEQE both in Georgian and English<sup>29</sup>).

The structure of the report includes several parts: the description of institution and study program, description of the individual procedure and involved experts, also the analysis of the compliance with each standard and substandard, description of factual circumstances and the evidence/indicators. The report also includes information regarding recommendations, suggestions, best practices, and a summary of the evaluation. The report template highlights the differences between recommendations and suggestions. It is indicated that the purpose of the recommendation in the report is to meet the requirements of one or another component of the standard, which the institution must plan to fulfill, while the suggestion is non-binding, and its purpose is to promote the development of the program or institution.

Individual program and cluster accreditation report templates have been developed recently in line with the implementation of the cluster accreditation procedures. The forms provide clear guidance whether each standard should include individual or cluster evaluation approaches of educational programs. The form ensures consistency of evaluation and gives an opportunity to experts to clearly form an overview, analysis, and opinions of the features of the program/cluster of programs.

Before the implementation of all forms in practice, they were thoroughly discussed with the HEIs and field experts, and they were amended and refined based on the obtained feedback.

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<sup>29</sup> [Forms](#)

The NCEQE has several mechanisms to ensure high quality of report:

- The chair of the expert panel is responsible for coordinating the process of writing the report. Draft and final report should be submitted to the Center accordingly;
- In accordance with the rules of experts', the information presented in the experts' report should be clear, well-substantiated and supported by evidence. Therefore, the chairman of the expert panel considers that the report document should be a unified and logical structure;
- If necessary, experts receive consultations from the coordinator, appointed by the Center. Before sending to the institution, the representatives of the Center, review the draft report and determine compliance with the formal requirements. If necessary, the draft report is sent back to the experts with the comments, for further development;
- The draft report is sent to the institution to present an argumentative position to ensure that there are no factual errors in the document. This approach ensures transparency and factual accuracy of the report. The letter regarding argumentative position is sent to the expert panel. After familiarizing with the argumentative position letter experts panel forms the final report. Experts should underline in the report if the argumentative position of the university was considered or not. If necessary, experts should indicate in the report why the feedback of the university is not considered.

For the high quality of experts' performance, the Center periodically conducts various capacity building activities in the direction of the peculiarities of the assessment process, including focusing on the preparation of a report with practical examples and analysis.

Experts' report is the main document for decision-making by the Authorization/Accreditation Council and all the reports are publicly available to interested parties on the NCEQE [website](#) together with the minutes and decisions of the Council's. The reports on accreditation of higher educational programs and authorization of higher educational institutions are synchronized with the DEQAR database so that the decisions and reports are publicly accessible for any interested party. Decisions are uploaded on the DEQAR database since February 2021.

## ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and Appeals

**Standard:** Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

The NCEQE has clearly defined complaints and appeals procedures to discuss the dissatisfaction and misapprehensions related to the formal outcomes of EQA activities. Appeal and complaints procedures are described in details and the information is provided on the NCEQE [website](#) for all the stakeholders providing instructions on how to file a complaint/appeal, how to submit the case and what steps

to follow. All relevant appeals and complaints forms are also provided on the NCEQE website<sup>30</sup>.

## **Appeal Council**

In case an HEI does not agree with the final decision made by the Accreditation/Authorization Council, it has the right to appeal the decision either to the Appeal Council or to a court within one month after the delivery of the final decision. Appeals processes are described in Accreditation/Authorization Charters (Authorization charter (99/n) - Article 95-103, Accreditation Charter (65/n)- Article 28<sup>1</sup>-29) which is available on the NCEQE's website.

The [Appeal Council](#) consists of nine members. The members of the Appeal Council are selected by the commission appointed by the Director of the NCEQE, and the procedure is like the selection and appointment of Authorization/Accreditation Councils (also see the [section ESG 3.3.](#)); the selection process is managed by the Center, and the CC members are also engaged in the selection process along with the top management of the Center and other stakeholders. The council is nominated by the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia and appointed by the Prime Minister of Georgia for a period of two years. The Accreditation/Authorization Charters guarantee the Appeal Council's functional independence from the Center, educational institutions, and state bodies.

The Appeal Council is not allowed to overrule the decisions made by the Accreditation/Authorization councils, but to return the cases back for revision to relevant councils. The Council discusses the appeal on public hearing on which the representatives of HEI are presented, also the members of respective council and the NCEQE staff. In case the appeal council finds any violations in terms of legislation of the content in the accreditation/authorization decision-making process, they make a decision to send the case back to the Accreditation/Authorization Council for rehearing. In the case of such a decision, the case will be discussed again by the Accreditation/Authorization Councils, at public hearings. The Accreditation/Authorization Councils make decisions based on procedures of Accreditation/Authorization Charters. While making the decision, Accreditation/Authorization Councils also consider the statements provided by the Appeal Council.

In case the Appeal Council does not find any violations and agrees that the Accreditation/Authorization Council's decision was made correctly, they decide that they agree with the decision of the Accreditation/Authorization Councils. After that, the HEI can make an appeal to the court. Also, the HEI can skip the appeal procedures of the Appeal Council and submit an appeal directly to the court.

Since 2018 the Appeal Council has discussed 37 appeal cases submitted by HEIs (8 for authorization, 29 - accreditation), mainly complaining about lack of arguments from the Authorization/Accreditation Councils for negate relevant decisions. It is worth noting that the quantity of the appeal cases is less than 5% of the decisions made by the Authorization Council and less than 3% of the decisions made by the

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<sup>30</sup> [Appeals and Complaints](#)

Accreditation Council in 2018-2023. The decisions of the Appeal Council are published on the NCEQE's [website](#).

### **Complaints procedures**

Based on the ENQA panel recommendation in the 2018 report, appeal and complaints procedures were refined to include more detailed information in order to ensure more transparency, objectivity and accessibility, and the information is available on the NCEQE website<sup>31</sup>. In 2020, the Center dedicated the specific section on its [webpage](#), which provides stakeholders with the description of complaint procedures and relevant templates. That enhances the overall transparency of the procedure. By complaints procedure the NCEQE tries to provide the best possible opportunity for institutions and to all the stakeholders in general and to work in an open and accountable way.

The NCEQE accepts two types of complaints (Accreditation Charter, Article - 31<sup>1</sup>; Authorization Charter - Article -102<sup>1</sup>):

- Complaints from HEIs concerning the external QA procedure caused by the violation of the Authorization or Accreditation Charters by the experts or the NCEQE staff; in case of the NCEQE staff, internal regulations of the Center should also be considered. in case there is violation by authorization/accreditation expert, the case is regulated by the Code of Ethics and the Rule of Experts;
- Complaints of students/staff members/other stakeholders against the HEIs authorized by the NCEQE, and the cases may concern the violation of the standards outlined in the Authorization/Accreditation Charters.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the HEIs can also comment on the accreditation/authorization site visit through special surveys that are sent to them after the site visit. They can evaluate each expert panel member together with the Chair of the panel as well as the Center representative and the overall services provided by the Center. The survey results are used to react to certain issues in the process of evaluation where necessary.

Complaints procedure enables the NCEQE to achieve a greater level of openness to the improvement of procedures, equality of opportunity for institutions and transparency in the work of the Agency. The Complaints procedure guarantees confidentiality and anonymity where necessary and through this mechanism the NCEQE tries to find resolution for the issues outlined in complaints.

Based on the analyses of appeal council decisions and submitted appeals, the NCEQE plans to enhance the appeal procedures. Also, as was already mentioned, it is planned to specify the number of times the person can be elected as a member of an appeal council. Also, changes in the Law is planned, based on which separate Appeal councils will be established for General, Vocational and Higher education, which will ensure more content wise discussions on appeals.

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<sup>31</sup> [Appeals and Complaints](#)



## 7. Opinions of Stakeholders

The NCEQE recognizes the importance of effective communication and collaboration with its stakeholders. The key stakeholder representatives are: members of the CC, one of the governing bodies, universities leadership and administration, academic staff, students, experts and decision-making councils, policymakers, and the public.

The NCEQE actively seeks feedback from its stakeholders and involves them in the development of QA policies and procedures. For example, during the implementation of the revised QA system in 2015-2018, the NCEQE engaged a diverse range of stakeholders, including students, employers, the government of Georgia, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Parliament of Georgia, HEIs, international and non-governmental organizations, peer review experts, and decision-making council members. The NCEQE held active public discussions on the topic, ensuring that all voices were heard.

Similarly, during the implementation of cluster accreditation, the NCEQE solicited and took into consideration the opinions of all stakeholders. Additionally, after each evaluation, the NCEQE seeks feedback from the different stakeholders to improve the evaluation process further. Members of the Expert panels are evaluated by the HEIs, members of decision-making councils and the NCEQE. The evaluation results have revealed so far that the work of expert panels is evaluated as satisfactory by the above-mentioned stakeholders. Based on the feedback received from HEIs, the NCEQE made certain improvements and took specific considerations into account. Some of the issues addressed include intensified professional development activities of the expert pool, clearer and more transparent Follow-up procedures, special guidelines for increasing student quotas. Moreover, the NCEQE is currently in the process of developing additional requirements for PhD programs in response to the feedback made by HEIs. However, there were also certain topics that were not taken into consideration, for example, HEIs requested that the experts provide the ways of fulfilling the recommendations along with the recommendations themselves. Also, HEIs asked that the expert panel take into consideration any additional evidence provided by the institutions after the site visit but before the oral hearing.

Furthermore, as per the strategic priorities (2021-2025) of the NCEQE, an annual satisfaction survey is conducted with the aim of identifying the satisfaction of various stakeholders with the different services provided by the NCEQE. The assessment of satisfaction (2022) with the services provided by the NCEQE in terms of Higher Education Quality Assurance revealed that the services provided are of high quality, conforming to ethical norms, and delivered within deadlines. The experts who conducted accreditation and authorization procedures received positive feedback, as did the work carried out by the councils. The evaluations of the effectiveness of the center's supporting measures also indicate a high level of satisfaction among respondents, considering the competence, ethics, usefulness, and the quality of the work carried out to strengthen HEIs.

The NCEQE also conducts an annual conference where the annual report on the outcomes of external QA activities is presented to a wider group of stakeholders, who are invited to share their comments and opinions.

During the preparation of the SAR for ENQA evaluation, the NCEQE sought the opinion of all stakeholders. The self-evaluation team involved stakeholders in the process, and the draft version of the report was presented to a wider group of stakeholders, as well as published on the webpage of the NCEQE for their feedback before it was submitted to the ENQA.



## 8. Recommendations and Main Findings from Previous Review(s) and Agency’s Resulting Follow-up

This part describes the recommendation by the ENQA-coordinated expert panel and the actions taken by the NCEQE in line with these recommendations. A more detailed narrative is also provided in the NCEQE follow-up [report](#), as well as in the respective sections of this SAR. It is noteworthy to mention that during the follow-up evaluation, ENQA expert panel members highlighted that the NCEQE had made significant progress in response to the recommendations provided.

Component/ Sub- Component	Recommendations by the ENQA-coordinated expert panel in 2019	Evaluation of Compliance	The Respective Actions taken by the NCEQE
<p><b>ESC 3.1</b></p> <p><b>Activities, Policy, and Processes for Quality Assurance</b></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>Substantially Compliant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shifting the role of the CC from advisory to managerial body; the scope of additional responsibilities of the CC is defined and new functions are added.</li> <li>• All members of the CC have already been appointed; current CC is new, and serving the third term since 2018 ENQA evaluation.</li> <li>• The respective amendments concerning the CC membership and requirements to the NCEQE Charter are done.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ESG 3.3.</b></p> <p><b>Independence</b></p>	<p>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”.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Partially Compliant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The respective amendments to the Charter of the NCEQE to increase the organizational independence of the Agency; the Coordination Council assumed managerial functions.</li> <li>• The circumstances for dismissal of Authorization/Accreditation/Appeal Council members have been further specified in Authorization/Accreditation/Appeal Council Charters, and the dismissal may occur in accordance with the Center recommendation.</li> <li>• The Rule for the Selection of the members of the Authorization /Accreditation/Appeal Councils has been appropriately amended to increase the NCEQE ownership over the selection process.</li> <li>• The term of office for the members of the Authorization/Appeal Councils has been prolonged up to 2 years, to increase independence in their decisions.</li> </ul>



			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The financial independence of the Agency from the state budget increases its operational independence which means that the Agency has the authority to manage its own financial resources independently.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ESG 3.4</b></p> <p><b>Thematic Analysis</b></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>Substantially Compliant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The methodology for thematic analysis has been elaborated.</li> <li>A separate structural unit was established – Planning, Research, and International Relations Department, responsible for the coordination of thematic analysis.</li> <li>Several thematic analyses have already been conducted and used in practice (see chapter 3.3) and the prospect plan is already outlined.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ESG 2.2.</b></p> <p><b>Designing Methodologies fit for Purpose</b></p>	<p>It is recommended to use the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programs.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>NCEQE is recommended to provide more guidance to experts and the Authorization Council on how to analyze the standard dealing with determining students' quota.</p>	<p>Substantially Compliant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The NCEQE implemented the amendments to the Charter of Accreditation of Joint Programs to clarify the process in detail.</li> <li>In the process of accreditation of a joint program, the expert panel must include an international expert (s) from the respective country where this program will be implemented.</li> <li>The amendment to the accreditation charter was implemented, and the detailed procedure for recognition of international accreditation and the list of the documentations that must be sent to the NCEQE were defined.</li> <li>The NCEQE has developed the detailed instructions and guidelines for expert pool, the HEIs, and Authorization/Accreditation Council members to evaluate and decide on the student quota.</li> </ul>



<p><b>ESG 2.3.</b> <b>Implementing Processes</b></p>	<p>The NCEQE has to define the details of the different follow-up procedures.</p>	<p>Substantially Compliant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The procedures for assessing one -year report of program accreditation have been established.</li> <li>• The procedures for assessing authorization one-year progress reports have been established.</li> <li>• The procedures for assessing three years progress reports for program accreditation and authorization have been defined.</li> <li>• Procedures for planned and case-based monitoring have been defined in both cases – authorization and program accreditation.</li> <li>• Handbook for follow-up procedures for program accreditation and authorization has been developed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ESG 2.4.</b> <b>Peer Review Experts</b></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>Substantially Compliant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To support the international experts to understand the local context, short videos in English have been prepared.</li> <li>• Key information on national context and regulatory documents has been added to the authorization/accreditation experts’ guideline.</li> <li>• Constant training sessions are offered to local and international experts.</li> <li>• One more online discussion session has been added to the pre-site visit preparation procedure – overall two preparatory sessions are offered to experts panel members prior to the site visit.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ESG 2.5.</b> <b>Criteria for Outcomes</b></p>	<p>The 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.</p>	<p>Substantially Compliant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The term of office for Authorization and Appeal Councils’ members is changed, up to 2 years.</li> <li>• The rule for voting has been changed and follows the principle of secret voting as was recommended through the ENQA evaluation.</li> <li>• In order to avoid the cases of interest of conflicts, it was specified in the Authorization/Accreditation Council Charters according to which the Council members cannot act on behalf of the institution which they represent, and they do not have the right to attend and participate in the internal discussions of the Council, and do not have the right to vote.</li> </ul>



			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Handbook for the Council members has been developed, including the methodological guidance.</li></ul>
<b>ESG 2.7.</b> <b>Complaints and Appeals</b>	The 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.	Substantially Compliant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Two types of complaints have been defined: from an HEI on external QA procedures concerning expert or staff member, and from a student/academic staff/ other stakeholders against HEIs.</li><li>• The complaint procedures and the respective forms have been defined in detail and are publicly available.</li></ul>

## 9. SWOT Analysis

The NCEQE team, while working on the self-evaluation report, conducted a SWOT analysis to identify the organization's challenges and priority areas for future development. The self-evaluation team, consisting of members from various stakeholders, initially drafted the SWOT analysis to ensure that all perspectives were considered. This draft of the self-evaluation report was then presented to a broader group of stakeholders, also published on the webpage of the NCEQE and their feedback was incorporated into the final SWOT analysis. The responses revealed that the NCEQE has made significant progress since 2018 in supporting the enhancement of quality culture in Georgia and establishing trust-based cooperation with various stakeholders.

### **Strengths:**

- The NCEQE is distinguished by its extensive experience in the development and implementation of effective educational quality assurance mechanisms, as well as has a proven track record of delivering a wide range of educational services, and its accumulated knowledge base is both comprehensive and reliable;
- The NCEQE demonstrates a proactive approach to strategic development priorities, which is evident in the organization's sustainable and unambiguous policy;
- High organizational culture and qualified professionals who possess a relevant structure that allows for adaptation to rapidly changing environments;
- Offering quality enhancement opportunities to HEIs that go beyond regular QA activities (Participation in different international projects);
- Role of the NCEQE is of considerable interest to its stakeholders and is highly relevant for structural reforms and policymaking in Georgian higher education;
- Strong commitment to internationalization, as reflected in its strategic engagement with partners and involvement of international experts in program accreditation and authorization (institutional accreditation), thereby promoting diversity of perspectives and expertise, fostering a culture of international cooperation and knowledge exchange;
- Open and extensive cooperation with various stakeholders, transparency, continuity, accountability of the NCEQE's activities and increased trust towards the Center;
- Financial sustainability and significant increase of own income sources of the NCEQE;
- Strong readiness for innovation, as evidenced by its implementation of various electronic resources (database for expert management, database for evaluating the implementation and fulfillment of strategic development plans, synchronization with the DEQAR database);
- Commitment to continuous development by revising its external evaluation procedures to ensure they remain relevant and efficient;
- The NCEQE effort to ensure continuity and strengthening its research activities, e.g., through thematic analysis;
- The NCEQE openness of constant increase the scope of responsibilities of its CC;

- The NCEQE endeavors for developing sector benchmarks to ensure that cluster accreditation model runs smoothly according to the NCEQE action plan;
- The NCEQE provides professional development opportunities for staff and experts.

**Weaknesses:**

- Periodical high workflows for staff working in higher education QA department;
- Weak data management capacity that involves storing, analyzing, and disseminating data on quality assurance, as well as use of technology for information sharing and decision-making;
- Lack of the Online platforms which are fully compatible with QA procedures and purposes;
- Less intensity and consistency of the performance evaluation of the members of the NCEQE expert pool, as well as subsequent feedback;
- Limited exposure of local peer review experts to international perspectives during the evaluation of educational institutions and programs.

**Opportunities:**

- Reflecting on changing provision of higher education globally (e.g., micro-credentials, online education, transnational education, Artificial Intelligence) in QA standards;
- Design and integration of sustainability approach in quality assurance, developing resources for academic personnel on integrating sustainability in T&L;
- Working closer with national and international student unions as well as labor market representatives for further supporting students and employers' engagement in the quality assurance processes;
- Enhancement of quality of improvement of doctoral education and research performance and activities which is one of the priorities of the country's Sustainable Development Goals that is also emphasized in the Georgia-EU AA agenda for 2021-2027;
- Further development of international cooperation of the NCEQE such as strengthening networking, especially with other ENQA member agencies;
- Involvement of international experts in follow-up evaluations, accreditation/authorization and sector councils in complex cases;
- Development of sector benchmarks for all fields of study and their implementation in line with cluster accreditation timeline;
- Conducting international accreditations and supporting transnational education by the NCEQE;
- Developing collaboration with the different regulatory bodies for enhancing respective fields of education (health care, maritime, etc.);
- Enhancement of diversity of structured programs aimed at expanding the mutual capacity building activities of experts both, local and international, and Authorization/Accreditation/Appeal Council members, e.g., online training programs and thematic training sessions;



**Threats:**

- Brain drains at institutional and national level, including academic staff, as well as aging of staff, especially in some specific fields;
- Academic integrity issues of Internal Quality Assurance mechanisms (Documents regarding the IQA procedures) in terms of each HEI;
- Ensuring adherence to the expert's code of conduct, as well as impartiality of various stakeholders can be challenging in the context of the "small country syndrome";
- Different pace of the HEIs to follow ongoing changes of the QA system due to academic and scientific capabilities; the situation is further exacerbated with high turnover of staff at the HEIs.

## 10.Key Challenges and Areas for Future Development

The current challenges have been identified through SWOT analysis that involved identifying external macro-environmental factors, as well as internal organizational processes and resources impacting quality assurance with the involvement of broad stakeholders.

Some HEIs tend to produce documents to meet the formal requirements of the QA standards, however, quality culture requires more internalization and institutionalization of QA procedures within the institution. Therefore, the HEIs need more support to encourage the introduction of self-reflection and improvement.

Lack of expertise at HEIs to develop benchmarks, collect and analyze the data and use them for decision-making, that may impact output-based quality assurance can also be identified as one of the challenges. This lack of expertise in some cases may be leading to misinterpretation of QA standards. The lack of expertise is vivid in case of high turnover of HEIs staff.

The NCEQE is committed to continuous improvement and capacity-building activities can be planned to expose experts to diverse international experiences and provide international experts with a deeper understanding of the local context. Involving international experts in follow-up activities and different councils can also contribute to the integration of more international experience into the overall higher education quality assurance system and foster QA culture. To better cover this topic the NCEQE can further expand cooperation with different international agencies and other bodies.

Implementing software to optimize operational quantitative data and organizing information dissemination sessions on both external and internal QA issues are among areas for future development. Moreover, closer cooperation with student unions and labor market representatives, developing resources for academic personnel on integrating sustainability in teaching and learning are also among development steps for implementing more enhancement-oriented approaches among HEIs. Increasing the ownership of staff, students and employers in QA and their participation in implementing QA mechanisms is of crucial importance for the HEIs.

In addition, for sustainable future development, it is crucial to reflect on the latest global developments in higher education. Rapid technological advancements in online learning, digital platforms and artificial intelligence require new approaches to assure quality of education delivered through these platforms and considering use of Artificial Intelligence tools. Due to changing educational delivery modes worldwide (e.g., micro credentials and other flexible and non-traditional models) require adaptation of QA processes and more flexibility of QA policies. Besides, rise of cross-border/transnational education poses challenges for external quality assurance, as quality assurance for transnational partnerships and education require robust evaluation framework and collaboration between QA agencies.

Besides the above-mentioned areas for future development, the table below reflects future plans for further elimination of weaknesses identified in the SWOT analysis:

<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Plan for improvement</b>
Periodical high workflows for staff working in higher education QA department;	The NCEQE tries to periodically monitor the workload of the staff and if needed hire additional staff on a contract basis; besides, based on the thematic analyses conducted by the NCEQE, the staff workload can be revised by filtering less essential processes from the QA. Furthermore, one of the objectives of the Working Plan 2023 of the NCEQE is - Objective 1.1: Organizational arrangement tailored to the needs of the Center and the opportunity for its institutional development are provided.
Weak data management capacity that involves storing, analyzing, and disseminating data on quality assurance, as well as use of technology for information sharing and decision-making;	The NCEQE constantly develops and adds software programs for effective implementation of different processes so that the data is collected and analyzed in a more systematic and automated manner; furthermore, one of the objectives of the Working Plan 2023 of the NCEQE is - Objective 1.2: The material and technical base of the Center, software and management policy comply with the requirements established by the legislation and are focused on the development and effective work of the Center.
Lack of the Online platforms which are fully compatible with QA procedures and purposes;	Through the support of the World Bank, capacity building activities are provided for Education Management Information System (EMIS), which ensures a better integration of the platforms employed in the HE of Georgia. After the capacity building activities are complete, a common system, E-Uni will be developed, which will incorporate all relevant data for HEI and other

	<p>stakeholders, including the NCEQE. E-Uni system will be also used for implementation a new model of HE funding and the working on the system will be finalized at the end of 2025 year.</p>
<p>Less intensity and consistency of the performance evaluation of the members of the NCEQE expert pool, as well as subsequent feedbacking;</p>	<p>The NCEQE is working on developing a new evaluation conception for the Expert Pool, incorporating digitalization. Additionally, a designated person from the relevant structural unit of the Center will be responsible for evaluating the performance of experts and providing them with consistent feedback. Furthermore, one of the objectives of the Working Plan 2023 of the NCEQE is - 6. 2. 4 Concept of the platform for the purpose of supporting the activities and professional development of the authorization and accreditation expert pool.</p>
<p>Limited exposure of local peer review experts to international perspectives during the evaluation of educational institutions and programs;</p>	<p>The NCEQE involves international experts in the program and authorization procedures, as well as other capacity building activities are planned for experience exchange, e.g., dissemination of information among local experts on possibilities to participate in international evaluations. However, the NCEQE plans to strengthen work in this direction; furthermore, one of the objectives of the Working Plan 2023 of the NCEQE is - Objective 6. 2. 3 Conducting training, workshops, and other supportive activities for the professional development of the Experts Pool of authorization and accreditation. Additionally, the Objectives 2.1-2.6 focus on strengthening international cooperation of the NCEQE with international partners and other ENQA member agencies.</p>

## Annexes

- Annex 1.** Law on Educational Quality Enhancement;
- Annex 2.** Composition of the Self-Assessment Group;
- Annex 3.** Authorization Charter (with Authorization Standards) (Authorization Procedures for HEIs starts from Chapter 4);
- Annex 4.** Accreditation Charter (with Accreditation Standards);
- Annex 5.** HE System in Georgia;
- Annex 6.** Charter of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement;
- Annex 7.** NCEQE International Cooperation;
- Annex 8.** The Qualification Requirements for CC Members;
- Annex 9.** Detailed explanation of the consideration of ESG Part 1 in the NCEQE's QA Standards and Procedures;
- Annex 10.** Rule on Selection of Expert Pool for Authorization of Higher Education Institutions and Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes, their Activities, Suspension and Termination of Membership.

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