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FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality Assurance in Higher Education

General Information

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1. Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The Goal of Quality Assurance

The goal of the system for quality assurance in higher education is to establish, at national level, a uniform approach for monitoring, understanding and systematically assessing the work of departments, schools and, consequently, of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Its primary objective is to assist institutions in accomplishing their mission within the framework of their individual identity and the specific traits that make them stand out from other Greek or foreign academic units or HEIs.

At the national level, the purpose of Quality Assurance is to objectively document and rationally understand the actual state of higher education; its ultimate aim is to propose a well documented set of measures, practices, guidelines and strategies to improve and assure quality in higher education.

The quality assurance system *does not aim* at ranking HEIs, their academic units or members of the academic community.

To whom does Quality Assurance apply?

Quality Assurance applies to all Greek HEIs, both independently at the level of academic units as well as at the level of HEIs through their academic units, the work of which it aims at continuously improving.

1.1 Usefulness of the Quality Assurance System

Through the system of quality assurance and its procedures HEIs assert their understanding of their mission, record the methods used to accomplish it and they develop and evaluate the means needed for this purpose. In this way, they demonstrate the quality level of their teaching, research and administrative functions; they further support their administrative bodies in decision-making and their external environment in adopting measures of improvement, thus affirming their right for equal participation in national, European and international academic developments.

The results of the quality assurance procedures provide for manifold usage, namely:

1. by academic units, for independent decision-making;
2. by HEIs for independent decision-making; furthermore,
3. by the State, to determine measures of assistance to meet requests by academic units and HEIs documented by the quality assurance process.

1.2 Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Europe

The manifest demand for quality assurance in higher education is the main objective of the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in which Greece, along with 45 other European countries, has subscribed. The *European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) is responsible for coordinating, setting common standards and guidelines and promoting good practices. It was established in 2000 in order to encourage European cooperation in the field of quality assurance. National agencies for quality assurance in higher education and research, the work of which has been accredited by external evaluators, have already become ENQA members.

According to ENQA and the resolution of the Council of European Ministers of Education (Berlin communiqué), quality assurance procedures must be governed by the following fundamental principles:

- *the great responsibility of HEIs to provide students and the society in general with high quality education;*
- *the fundamental importance of HEI autonomy, which is firmly linked with the great responsibility it inherently involves;*
- *the need to establish a target-efficient process of external quality assurance, which should not overburden academic units and HEIs.*

The common standards and guidelines of ENQA are based on generally acknowledged principles aiming at:

- *improving the education provided in the EHEA;*
- *supporting and assisting HEIs in managing and improving their quality and, consequently, reinforcing, recognizing and justifying their autonomy;*
- *creating a common framework for the work of quality assurance agencies; and*
- *establishing a transparent, simple and comprehensible procedure of external quality assurance.*

1.3 Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Greece

Law No 3374/2005 has established quality assurance for higher education in Greece, following the example of some 45 European countries.

The establishment of the process of quality assurance is expected to reinforce the autonomy of HEIs by entrusting them with the responsibility of evaluating their own work by means of a self-evaluation process using transparent and systematic procedures in which students participate.

Law No 3374/2005 on quality assurance deals mainly with:

- *procedures for quality assurance in higher education;*
- *criteria and guidelines for quality in higher education; and*
- *the establishment of the Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency in higher education (HQAA).*

The objective of Quality assurance, as referred to in law 3374/2005 (article 1 § 2), is:

« ...the systematic, documented and detailed evaluation, presentation, recording and critical analysis of the work of HEIs using objective criteria ... On the basis of the results of the evaluation, HEIs and the State take the necessary measures

to assure and improve the quality of the work undertaken by HEIs in view of their mission to provide high quality higher education.»

Quality Assurance Bodies

The responsibility for Quality Assurance lies with the following bodies:

- at the institutional level, the standing Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) (Law No 3374/2005, Article 2 § 4);
- at the academic unit/department level, and only for the duration of the internal evaluation process, the *Internal Evaluation Group (IEG)*, and, in special cases, the *Special Evaluation Group (SEG)* (Law No 3374/2005, Article 5 § 2 and 3);
- at the external evaluation level, the *ad hoc External Evaluation Committee (EEC)*, constituted according to detailed regulations stipulated by Law No 3374/2005 (Article 8 § 5);
- at the national level, the independent *Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (HQAA)*, (Law No 3374/2005, Article 10)

All the above mentioned bodies have a coordinating, non regulatory, function. The responsibility for deciding on quality assurance issues in academic units and HEIs rests with the standard academic bodies, which may in no way be substituted by HQAA, QAUs, IEGs or EECs.

1.4 What is HQAA (Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency - ADIP)

HQAA - ADIP is the supervising and coordinating agency for the quality assurance system in Greek Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Within this framework ADIP guarantees the transparency of the evaluation process and supports HEIs while they carry out procedures aiming at quality assurance and improvement in higher education (Law 3374/2005, Article 10 § 2).

The goal of HQAA is to establish and implement a uniform quality assurance system to be used as a reference system for the work and achievements accomplished by HEIs. Furthermore, HQAA's objective is to collect and codify all crucial information which will instruct the State to effectively support higher education in Greece. In order to accomplish its objectives, HQAA collaborates with and supports HEIs in their effort to assure quality in higher education, thus aiming at securing the confidence of Greek society in the educational system.

HQAA is by definition an independent multi-member institutional body consisting of senior public servants nominated by HEIs. They cover the entire spectrum of disciplines embraced by the Greek HEIs.

All evaluation procedures, operational regulations, as well as HQAAs own quality assurance process are transparent and open to public scrutiny.

1.5 Quality Assurance Criteria and Guidelines

The results of the quality assurance procedures are evaluated according to four groups of criteria: (a) *teaching*, (b) *research*, (c) *programs of study*, and (d) *other services*. Guidelines for each group of criteria are further analyzed in Law No 3374/2005, Article 3 § 3. They are standardized, supplemented and further specified through standards and guidelines published by HQAA (see "Analysis of the criteria for the Internal Evaluation process", v. 2.0, July 2007).

2. The Quality Assurance System

Quality assurance is a systematic approach through which academic units and institutions monitor and improve their academic activities on a constant basis.

The quality assurance system comprises the following three procedures:

1. the annual recording and evaluation of work accomplished by the academic units (*Annual Internal Reports*),
2. the periodic – every four years - self-evaluation of the work accomplished by academic units (Internal Evaluation), and finally,
3. the fusion of the internal evaluation findings with the objective opinion of independent experts who do not belong to the academic unit (External Evaluation).

2.1 Annual Evaluation and Internal Reports

The first step towards quality assurance is to systematically assess and monitor the work accomplished by each academic unit.

The *Annual Internal Report*, produced with the responsibility of each academic unit during the academic year, is based on the data which have been collected. At HEI level, the “Annual Internal Report” is produced every two years: it collectively refers to all its academic units and is based on data included in the annual reports submitted by them.

The *Annual Internal Reports* allow the academic unit to control and assess the degree to which it functions in accordance with the goals and objectives set by its founding act and by subsequent decisions of its governing bodies.

The process leading to the composition of *Annual Internal Reports* aims at the regular and systematic monitoring of all aspects of the complex work carried out by each academic unit. By recording such data in the *Annual Internal Report*, the academic unit gains access to fixed points of reference, through which it can control and independently redefine the quality of its operations and, in general, the advancement of the objectives that it sets.

More specifically, internal reports offer the opportunity for academic units to confirm the pace and efficacy of their services and to identify, early on, areas where the development of additional, novel or different activities is needed for improvement. Moreover and through consecutive internal reports, academic units can independently control their advancement through the years. They can also proceed, within the framework of periodic external evaluations, to the serious assessment of their work, its revision and redefinition.

Collecting Documentary Data

Academic units are responsible for collecting the documentary data with the participation of all faculty members and students and for all operational levels.

The complete and systematic collection of reliable data about the academic unit’s operation should comply with quality assurance criteria and standards. The main purpose of collecting and recording in the *Annual Internal Report* complete and accurate documentary data is to

assist and facilitate the daily operation of academic units and to support decision-making at all levels of their operation. To this aim, documentary data should normally be collected:

- according to their periodicity;
- with proportional participation of all members of the academic unit (teaching and research staff, administrative personnel, and students) (see the data recording forms for teaching staff and courses, and the student questionnaire proposed by HQAA).
- with procedures generally agreed by the members of the academic unit.

The *Annual Internal Report* can be written either at various stages, during the collection of data, or at the end of the evaluation period, in a way specified by the academic unit. Obviously, it should represent the synthesis and fusion of views expressed by all its members. In any case, the unit, its members and governing bodies are sole responsible to outline the process of data collection. The main criterion for adopting and defining a given approach, and, in turn, for formulating the *Annual Internal Reports*, should be the documented recording of the rate of short- and long-term achievement of the academic unit's mission and objectives.

Writing the Annual Internal Report

The main points of the *Annual Internal Report* deal with those elements which record the operation of the academic unit; thus, the report functions as a collective/concise presentation of documentary data (see *Guidelines for the internal evaluation process*, v. 1.0, July 2007).

The qualitative, quantitative and other data included in the *Annual Internal Report* are mainly indicative of the measure of quality assurance set by the academic unit, in compliance with recent developments in the domain both of curricular disciplines as well as in that of academic institutions.

In between two successive *Annual Internal Reports* the academic unit has the opportunity and the duty to reinforce, both qualitatively and quantitatively, its achievements as well as to deal with eventually unresolved issues or with problems identified through the analysis of documentary data. Changes in data and indices, which are recorded in successive *Annual Internal Reports*, allow the unit to monitor the progress and success of its initiatives.

The composition of the report is definitely facilitated by the systematic, detailed and, most importantly, reliable collection of data, which constitute the essential documentation of the report. As to the quality of data, it obviously depends on the efficacy and transparency adopted and applied for the procedures of data collection.

Just as in data collection, the adoption in the composition of the *Annual Internal Reports* of quality assurance standards, criteria and guidelines set by HQAA (see *Analysis of the criteria for the internal evaluation process*, v. 2.0, July 2007) will considerably facilitate the realization by the departments of the second phase of the quality assurance process, namely the Internal Evaluation. Moreover, the standardization of the criteria will allow the transfer of data from departmental to institutional level and, ultimately, to the national level.

It is obvious that each academic unit may and should specify and complement the data which it collects and analyzes by adding criteria or indices, which are believed to mark and represent specific aspects of the unit's own particular profile.

The concordance of the *Annual Internal Report* with HQAA standards is not mandatory. It is however desirable for practical reasons: data formally collected for the *Annual Internal Reports*, can be used without additional elaboration, to complete formal *Internal* and

External Evaluation Reports. To ease the task of the departments, HQAA has published a set of guidelines for the composition of *Annual Internal Reports* and it remains at the disposal of stakeholders in need of assistance.

2.2 Internal Evaluation (Auto-Evaluation) of Academic Units)

The *Internal Evaluation* represents a systematic review over the quality of work accomplished within an academic unit during a definite period of time.

The purpose of the internal evaluation is to help academic units form a judicious assessment of the quality of their performance on the basis of objective criteria and generally accepted standards. It has the following objectives:

1. to present and document the achievements of the academic unit;
2. to identify areas in need of improvement;
3. to outline improvement strategies;
4. to promote initiatives for independent action *within the academic unit*, when and wherever possible;
5. to encourage decision-making for independent actions *within the HEI*, when and wherever possible.

As stipulated by law 3374/2005, “*the internal evaluation report should be taken into account by all qualified governing bodies involved in decision-making at the academic unit or HEI level*”. At the state level, decision-making should in principle rely on the conclusions reached at the subsequent stage, that of the *External Evaluation*.

The *internal evaluation* is a regularly recurring collaborative process, which covers two successive academic semesters; it is repeated every four years at the latest. In fact, it is a self-evaluation process marking the very identity of the academic unit by recording and presenting all its operational features, positive and negative, and by illustrating its ambitions. During the process of internal evaluation, data collected with the collaboration of faculty and students with reference to actual and desired levels of quality and the means for their achievement are recorded. The internal evaluation culminates in the composition of the *Internal Evaluation Report*, which is approved by the academic unit and subsequently submitted by the institution’s QAU to the HQAA.

The *Internal Evaluation Group* (IEG) appointed by the academic unit is responsible for coordinating the internal evaluation process and for the composition of the *Internal Evaluation Report*. IEG is not a permanent body of the academic unit. It is appointed and functions only for the duration of the internal and external evaluation.

HQAA’s publication under the title “*Analysis of the criteria for the internal evaluation process*”, may serve as a basis for carrying out the *Internal Evaluation* process. It contains generally accepted quality criteria, each analyzed by means of detailed questionnaires, allowing for data referral from departmental to institutional and, ultimately, to the national level.

As already mentioned, academic units are expected, if deemed necessary, to add or specify criteria or indices which reflect their particular academic profile, clearly indicating in each case the context (what and how?) and the rationale (why?) of their differentiation.

2.3 External Evaluation by a Committee of Independent Experts

The *External Evaluation* consists in the systematic and analytical scrutiny through External Evaluation Committees of the conclusions of the *Internal Evaluation*.

The goal of the external evaluation is to ascertain the completeness, transparency and objectivity of the internal evaluation report and all documentary data, as well as to form an unprejudiced and unbiased opinion with the following objectives:

1. to identify good practices and areas needing improvement;
2. to document, present and support valid demands of the academic unit at the HEI and national level;
3. to identify and promote good practices nationwide.

The *External Evaluation* process is initiated as soon as the internal evaluation report is submitted to HQAA. The Committee of *External Evaluators* is expected to base the *External Evaluation Report* on the internal evaluation report and on conclusions drawn from direct contact with the academic unit and from the exchange of ideas during the *site visit*. The Committee should analyze in depth the findings of the internal evaluation report in reference to:

- the achievements of the academic unit (or the HEI);
- areas needing improvement or adjustment;
- the effectiveness of actions undertaken by the academic unit to ensure and improve the quality of their work;
- the unit's overall consistency in pursuing its mission and objectives.

According to law 3374/2005 “The external evaluation committee consists of 5 experts, drawn from HQAA's *Register* of independent auditors. The *Register* includes experts recommended by HEIs and is revised every four years”.