

Quality Assurance System in Malta.

Higher education (HE) in Malta is regulated by the **Education Act, 1988** (Chapter. 327 of the Laws of Malta) and subsequent amendments. HE includes all non-compulsory formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malta can be classified as state (public), non-state (Independent/Private Institutions) and self-accrediting institutions. Three providers are designated self-accrediting institutions by virtue of Subsidiary Legislation 607.03: The University of Malta (UM), the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), and the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS).

Quality Assurance of HEI's falls within the remit of the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA), whose aim is that of establishing and maintaining standards in the context of the national qualifications framework. The Malta Qualification Framework (MQF) was launched in 2007 and established a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications at that level in any system of qualifications across Europe.

The MFHEA is the competent authority in Malta for the licensing, accreditation and quality assurance of providers and programmes, which is regulated by Subsidiary Legislation 607.03 Further and Higher Education (Licensing, Accreditation and Quality assurance regulations). Quality assurance aims to safeguard the quality of further and higher education within an internal and external framework of accountability on a national, European and international level. The MFHEA has strengthened quality assurance in Malta through the establishment of the National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education (NQAF). The Framework contains eleven IQA standards based on Part I of the ESG and enriched by EQAVET perspectives and establishes the parameters for a national external quality assurance (EQA) audit system. The MFHEA supports accredited and prospective further and higher education institutions in Malta by providing guidance on areas which are considered important to ensure a quality assured learning environment in further and higher education.

In accordance with Subsidiary Legislation 607.03 Further and Higher Education Institutions shall have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its quality assurance, that means that they shall have in place an internal quality assurance system which shall be designed specifically to ensure the fitness and properness for purpose of the institutions and their programmes, to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Accreditation Process

The accreditation of educational entities providing accredited or recognised further and/ or higher education courses is a legal requirement as per Subsidiary Legislation 607.03 Courses are referred to as 'accredited' when they have been evaluated by the MFHEA and accredited or pegged to the MQF. All education institutions wishing to offer such programmes of study need to submit their prospective programmes to the MFHEA for accreditation. New entities must also submit an application for Provider Accreditation according to S.L. 607.03.

In Malta, providers have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its quality assurance, thus they shall have an internal quality assurance system in place. Institutions submit their Internal Quality Assurance policies for evaluation along with the application for provider accreditation. The Quality Assurance Unit evaluates the document, which goes through three cycles of evaluation, including a final report issued by the MFHEA.

Programme accreditation

The Referencing Report provides guidelines for the criteria used by the MFHEA to determine the appropriateness of the application and the learning outcomes associated with a particular MQF level. Up to MQF level 7, whether a programme leads to an award or a qualification is determined by the ECTS/ ECVET points the programme has.

Programme accreditation is granted prior to the start of the programme/course, if it meets the standards and is valid. In accordance with S.L. 607.03 (Article 38) periodic quality audits shall be carried out every 5 years.

Provider accreditation

In accordance with Subsidiary Legislation 607.03 (Article 37) an external quality assurance audit (EQA) is a legal obligation and conducted for the purpose of confirming or revoking the licence previously granted by the MFHEA.

The MFHEA developed the External Quality Assurance - Provider Audit Manual of Procedures, which sets out the procedures for the implementation of external quality audits. The EQA process applies to all licensed further and higher education providers.

Description of the responsibilities and structure of the MFHEA

The MFHEA's mission statement is "to foster the development and achievement of excellence in further and higher education in Malta through research, effective licensing, accreditation, quality assurance and recognition of qualifications established under the Malta Qualifications Framework."

The MFHEA focuses on:

- providing accreditation to further and higher educational institutions;
- providing accreditation to programmes or courses of studies at further and higher education levels;
- quality assurance of both educational institutions and programmes or courses;
- recognition of obtained national or international qualifications as well as prospective qualifications;
- validation of informal and non-formal learning;
- research and policy recommendation on issues related to further and higher education.

The MFHEA's responsibilities also include the following:

- maintaining a register (database) of authorised and accredited institutions and programmes available in Malta;
- developing a National Strategy for Further and Higher education;
- promoting structured dialogue between all Further and Higher education institutions;

Organizational structure

The Board which is the executive body of the MFHEA, consists of a Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and 5 other members. The Board members are appointed for a period of 3 years and can be re-appointed at the end of their term of office. The members must have leadership qualities and an understanding of Further and Higher education within the context of the general socio-economic development. It shall also include one person representing persons with disability nominated by the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability and the Chairperson of the Quality Assurance Committee. Board meetings shall be held at least once a month and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Authority shall attend meetings as a non-voting member.

The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) currently consists of 6 members, including the Chairperson of the Committee. By law the QAC is independent and autonomous in its

decisions and responsible for quality assurance audits for further and higher educational institutions. QAC meetings are held at least once a month.

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is responsible for the day-to-day running of the MFHEA and shall report to the Board on such matters whenever requested.

The MFHEA consists of the following 7 Units:

- Accreditation, Licensing, Validation and Quality Assurance
- Communications
- Corporate
- Legal
- MQRIC
- MRC
- Research & Policy

The Malta Qualifications Recognition Information Centre (MQRIC) is the competent body within the MFHEA that recognises qualifications against the MQF. It provides recognition and comparability of both academic and vocational qualifications, using both the MQF and the EQF to provide recognition advice on both local and international qualifications. It also assists in the recognition of Maltese qualifications abroad. MQRIC forms part of the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC) and the National Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC) as the local official ENIC-NARIC centre in Malta

The Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (MRC) is part of the MFHEA and an important aspect of the free movement of citizens throughout the EU. This is governed by Directive 2005/36/EC on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications which has been transposed into national legislation primarily by means of the Mutual Recognition of Qualifications Act 2002 (Cap 451) and the Recognition of Professional Qualifications Regulations (S.L. 451.03). The law lays down the framework through which regulated professions are to be recognised by 'Designated Authorities' being the entities responsible for each individual regulated profession.

MFHEA also manages a pool of External Quality Assurance peer-reviewers, who are eligible to be appointed as a panel to conduct EQA audits of licensed institutions, and a pool of programme evaluators who accredit programmes before institutions start delivering them. To attract more peer reviewers and improve their qualifications the MFHEA conducts 2-3 days training on External Quality Assurance annually, including a workshop (mock audit).