



Action plan for quality assurance development in Azerbaijan's higher education system



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1. Introduction

The national action plan for Azerbaijan's higher education quality assurance development was adopted as part of the Supporting European QA Agencies in Meeting the ESG (SEQA-ESG) project, co-financed by the European Commission under the framework of a call for initiatives to support the implementation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reforms. The project is coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The project's duration is from December 2022 to November 2025, and it supports four EHEA countries in advancing their quality assurance systems towards full compliance with the Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the EHEA.

In Azerbaijan, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (TKTA) has taken a leading role in this project. Extensive discussions were held to propose suitable measures for addressing the issue areas covered in the action plan for advancing the national quality assurance system. In close cooperation with the Ministry of Science and Education, TKTA identified the key priority areas for ensuring the compliance of the national quality assurance system with ESG.

The shared objective is to attain full compliance with the ESG and to integrate into the European quality assurance structures, thereby enhancing the international recognition of Azerbaijan's higher education system. This integration will also strengthen cooperation with other relevant bodies within the EHEA, fostering greater international collaboration and improving the overall quality and credibility of higher education in Azerbaijan.

2. Country's higher education system

Higher education in Azerbaijan is governed by the Constitution, relevant decrees, regulations, and related normative acts. The primary legislative act that regulates higher education is the Law on Education, adopted in 2009. Currently, the Law on Higher Education is under discussion.

The higher education system in Azerbaijan is comprised of three levels: undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral studies. Undergraduate degrees typically span four years (five years for part-time programs) and cover a wide range of disciplines. Depending on the duration of the specialization, students in bachelor's degree programs are required to earn between 240 and 300 ECTS credits, while those in basic higher medical education programs must earn between 300 and 360 ECTS credits. For master's degree programs, students must accumulate 90 ECTS credits for a normative duration of 1.5 years, or 120 ECTS credits for a 2-year program. The accumulation of the specified credits by students is mandatory.

Upon completion of the bachelor's level, students are awarded the academic title of "bakalavr" (bachelor's degree) and are qualified to work in various fields, except in scientific and pedagogical areas at research institutes and higher education institutions. Those who want to work in scientific and pedagogical areas are required to complete the master's degree.

The higher education system, including the establishment and operation of higher educational institutions, is overseen by the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Ministry is also responsible for developing and administering the execution of educational policies, programs, and other education-related initiatives in the country. There are 51 higher education institutions, with 41 being public and 10 private institutions. In total, about 231.400 students study at higher education institutions in Azerbaijan.

Reforms in the Azerbaijani higher education system have been ongoing. The main purpose of these reforms has been to align the higher education system with international

standards and enhance the quality of education. The key reforms in this regard were the enforcement of the Law on Education (LoE), the introduction of a three-cycle higher education system, the adoption of the European Credit Transfer System, the implementation of the Bologna Process, the elaboration of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (AzNQF), the approval of legislative and strategic acts, such as the National Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan approved in 2013, Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development, the Rules on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions, the State Program on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad in 2007–2015, and the State Program on Raising Competitiveness of Higher Education in Azerbaijan in 2019–2023.

Per capita merit-based government scholarships and tuition fees on a self-paid basis serve as the primary funding sources for higher education institutions in Azerbaijan. Higher education institutions also generate funds through different national and international projects, donations, copyright patents, consultation services, and so on. Additionally, public higher education institutions (HEIs) receive financial support from the state through different grants. Moreover, the government renders assistance through the provision of tuition fee waivers to vulnerable groups such as refugees, IDPs, students from single-parent families, and martyrs.

3. Quality assurance of higher education in the country

3.1 Legal framework

The national legal framework for quality assurance in higher education is based on the Rules for Accreditation of Educational Institutions adopted in 2010. After the structural changes and establishment of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, which until 2016 was functioning as a department affiliated with the Ministry of Education, the legal basis for the accreditation of higher education institutions underwent significant revision. In 2020 and 2022, the accreditation rules and subsequently the institutional and program accreditation criteria underwent significant updates based on the requirements of ESG 2015.

The regulatory basis for TKTA is firmly established by various legislative acts and official documents. TKTA operates as a public entity, which enables it to establish its own budget and personnel. As stipulated in its charter, the Agency conducts its activities in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan, its Charter, other decrees and orders of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, decisions and orders of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and other normative legal acts.

This section will detail the extent to which this legal framework supports and enables compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

Organisational Independence

TKTA's organisational independence is anchored in several key legal documents, including its own charter and Presidential decree. These documents establish TKTA as a separate legal entity with a distinct organisational structure and financial autonomy. The Agency is governed by a Management Board consisting of five members, including a chairperson and a deputy chairperson, whose duties and responsibilities are clearly defined. The TKTA Charter stipulates that members of the Management Board are appointed and dismissed by the Minister, however, explicit procedures for appointment and dismissal should be set. Defining the selection process, eligibility criteria, and reasons for dismissal could further strengthen the Agency's independence.

While the number of staff is regulated by Presidential decree, the Agency is able to employ additional staff on a contractual basis to further extend its human resource capacity in institutional and program accreditation. TKTA also maintains responsibility for its own budget allocation once the lump-sum budget is agreed upon. The operational cost of institutional and program accreditation is solely generated through the payment of accreditation fees, earmarked by HEIs. This arrangement reflects a degree of financial independence that is typical for public quality assurance agencies.

Operational Independence

The operational independence of TKTA is largely supported by the clear separation of responsibilities outlined in the legal documents governing accreditation processes. These include the Law on Education, the Accreditation Rules, TKTA's Charter, and the Charter of the Accreditation Council. TKTA has full authority to design and implement accreditation procedures, select and train experts, conduct site visits, and draft accreditation reports without external interference.

While the Ministry determines the areas of assessment and the standards for the accreditation assessments, TKTA has the authority to propose amendments based on stakeholder feedback. TKTA also has substantial autonomy in designing the procedural rules for accreditation. TKTA also has full authority to train and select peer review experts to carry out the accreditation processes. The accreditation commissions, in their operations, are also independent, and the legal framework avoids any interference by external parties. These arrangements allow TKTA and the accreditation commissions to operate independently within a legally defined framework, ensuring that their expertise is appropriately applied in the accreditation process.

Independence of Formal Outcomes

TKTA's independence in terms of formal outcomes is well-defined. The Agency has full control over the drafting and approval of accreditation reports, ensuring that no third party can unduly influence the results of the reviews. In 2022, Azerbaijan adopted new accreditation criteria and indicators for higher education institutions. These were formalized through two key acts: the "Institutional Accreditation Criteria for Higher Education Institutions" and the "Program Accreditation Criteria for Higher Education Institutions." These measures were implemented following the decision outlined in the "Rules for Accreditation of Educational Institutions" by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Subsequent modifications to this decision were made to ensure compliance with the "Statute on the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan."

The Accreditation Council, which is responsible for making final accreditation decisions, does not have the authority to alter the assessments presented in the accreditation reports, thus preserving TKTA's independence in this critical area.

Critical Reflection and Remaining Challenges

Despite the strong legal foundation supporting TKTA's independence, certain areas require further enhancement:

1. **Selection and Appointment of Board Members:** No comprehensive criteria-based procedural document is available for the selection, appointment, and dismissal of the Management Board members. Introducing a criteria-based policy for the selection of the Management Board members could further strengthen the Agency's organisational independence.

2. **Staffing Regulations:** Since the charter endorsed by the Presidential decree limits the staff number to 42, further extension goes through the Cabinet of Ministers, whereby initially the Ministry of Finance grants the extension. TKTA partially mitigates the challenge by contracting external staff. Considering that the endorsement of the accreditation criteria for VET is currently underway and that four VET schools are scheduled for accreditation by the end of 2024, followed by specialized secondary schools in 2025, TKTA has raised a proposal to increase the number of staff members.

3.2 Stakeholder engagement

According to ESG 3.1, agencies must undertake external quality assurance activities regularly and ensure stakeholder involvement in their governance and work. TKTA's core legal mandate includes the accreditation of educational institutions and programs, monitoring of internal quality assurance, and recognition of prior learning. The involvement of stakeholders—representatives from higher education institutions and scientific disciplines, labor market experts, and students—in accreditation review activities is ensured through legal documents. The Agency established a pool for external reviewers consisting of administrative and teaching staff from HEIs, students, and representatives from the labor market and scientific organizations who have undergone an extensive training and certification process.

The Agency also systematically collects feedback from the HEI's and accreditation experts on the accreditation criteria and processes through surveys, workshops, roundtable discussions, and seminars. The input from these activities is used to enhance the legislative and operational basis of the accreditation process and topic selection for thematic analyses. For example, one such activity is a series of roundtable discussions that TKTA is conducting with the participation of HEI representatives and accreditation review experts to refine the institutional accreditation criteria.

TKTA also benefits from an International Advisory Board, which aids in implementing international standards in quality assurance for higher education, strengthens international cooperation, and provides consultancy and expert assessments of TKTA's policies and procedures.

The key area that requires improvement is the provision of procedures for regulating stakeholder involvement.

Critical Reflection and Challenges

1. **Policy on Stakeholder Involvement:** Although TKTA ensures comprehensive involvement of stakeholders in accreditation processes as well as the process of designing respective policy documents, no explicit policy outlining their specific roles, responsibilities, and activities has been set yet.

TKTA recognizes the involvement of stakeholders in the accreditation processes and in designing and improving policy documents. To achieve full compliance with ESG 3.1, a clear articulation of the stakeholder's involvement in the respective activities needs to be undertaken. These reflections will inform Section 4 of the action plan, linking directly to the elaborated priority actions needed for improvement.

3.3 National/agency criteria in external quality assurance

TKTA's accreditation criteria are designed to address the effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes as described in Part 1 of the ESG. The Annex 1 provides an overview of how national accreditation criteria link with subsequent standards in Part 1 of the ESG.

Critical Reflection and Challenges

1. **Accreditation criteria:** The current accreditation criteria combine seven sections and 271 indicators, which is overwhelming for the higher education institutions and accreditation commissions in the assessment process. Accreditation criteria should be reviewed and amended based on stakeholder feedback to enhance efficiency and clarity.

3.4 QA activities and their methodologies

Internal Quality Assurance

While TKTA has established various processes related to internal quality assurance and applies them extensively in its operations, there is a need to formalize and document these practices under the relevant policies and procedures. For example, TKTA implements feedback mechanisms from both internal and external stakeholders, such as higher education institutions and accreditation commissions, to enhance the accreditation process. However, the practice should be reflected in the relevant policies to enable a systematic approach to the process. TKTA should ensure that its internal quality assurance policy and procedures are clearly defined and accessible to the relevant stakeholders.

External Quality Assurance

The core of TKTA's mandate is the external quality assurance of educational institutions and programs across all sectors of education, excluding the doctoral level. TKTA also engages in monitoring internal quality assurance at institutions and recognizing prior learning, including foreign qualifications and non-formal and informal learning.

Evaluation Process

TKTA's evaluation of higher education in Azerbaijan involves several structured steps:

1. **Self-Assessment:** Institutions are required to submit a self-assessment report for both institutional and program accreditation. This report is reviewed by the accreditation commission, which conducts an external assessment based on legal criteria, methodological guidelines developed by TKTA, and accumulated knowledge of the higher education sector.
2. **External Assessment:** An accreditation commission, typically consisting of five to thirteen members (including national and international education experts, a student, and a labour market representative), conducts the external assessment. Compulsory site visits are conducted for this purpose. These visits serve to verify and supplement the information provided in the self-assessment report and typically include meetings with HEI's management, on-site inspections, document reviews, and discussions with students and staff.
3. **Reporting:** Upon the completion of a site visit, the Accreditation Commission prepares a final report summarising findings and recommendations. Once the report is completed

and discussed by the Commission, the chair of the Commission submits the report to the Agency for uploading to the respective e-platform.

4. **Feedback:** Once the report is uploaded to the e-platform, within the next ten days, the accredited institution can provide feedback, which is sent to the Accreditation Commission for revision within five days.
5. **Appeal:** If there is no agreement on the final report between the Accreditation Commission and the educational institution, based on the appeal of the latter, the final report is revised by the Appeals Commission within ten days, involving both parties in the process.
6. **Approval:** The final report, signed by the Accreditation Commission, is submitted to the Agency, and discussed by the Accreditation Council in accordance with the regulations. The Accreditation Council reviews the final report based on the Agency's presentation and, considering the opinion of the Accreditation Commission, makes one of the following decisions: "compliant," "mostly compliant," "partially compliant," or "non-compliant."
7. **Follow-Up:** Regular follow-up reports and monitoring of significant changes are part of the follow-up procedures. TKTA revises mandatory action plans developed by HEIs for addressing the recommendations for improvement put forward by the accreditation commission. To ensure continuous improvement, the Agency conducts monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations.

International (Cross-Border) External QA Activities

TKTA's international QA activities include considering the outcomes of reviews by foreign agencies as outlined in the accreditation rules, clause 4.7. However, further details and conditions for considering these reviews need elaboration. Overseeing the accreditation of joint programs through the use of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes is not yet implemented since it is not stipulated in the national legislation.

Pre-Defined, Published, and Consistent Criteria (ESG 2.5)

Based on the new accreditation rules adopted in 2022, institutional accreditation is assessed across seven areas with 30 criteria and 271 indicators. Program accreditation is evaluated using 12 criteria and 106 indicators.

The accreditation of higher education institutions and programs is carried out based on these indicators, rated on a scale of 0 to 3. The accreditation process is carried out through three sequential stages, which are preparation, evaluation, and decision-making.

The performance of educational institutions and the implementation of educational programs at each educational level are evaluated according to state education standards based on the relevant Accreditation Criteria as compliant, mostly compliant, partially compliant, or noncompliant.

Based on the score, one of the following decisions is made:

1. 91-100% - "Compliant";
2. 76-90% - "Mostly compliant";
3. 61-75% - "Partially compliant";
4. 60% or less - "Non-compliant".

The Accreditation Commission analyses the information provided in the Self-Assessment Report. These criteria and indicators aim to standardise and enhance the quality of higher education in Azerbaijan, ensuring that institutions meet established benchmarks for institutional and programme excellence. These criteria, along with evidence, are examined during the evaluation. The consistent application of these criteria is supported by expert training, the role of review coordinators, and the oversight of department heads and directors. The final report prepared by the Accreditation Commission based on the evaluation criteria is published on TKTA's website.

Critical Reflection and Challenges

Despite these structured processes, further enhancement is necessary in several respects:

1. **Internal Quality Assurance:** TKTA should ensure that internal quality assurance policies and procedures are clearly defined and accessible to the relevant stakeholders.
2. **Follow-Up Consistency:** While follow-up procedures are in place, their consistency and robustness need improvement to systematically address the recommendations from external evaluations.
3. **International Recognition Processes:** The conditions for considering the outcomes of reviews by foreign agencies need to be formalised.

3.5 Peer review experts

As stated above, TKTA has a pool of experts who have been trained and certified as accreditation experts. The training program started in 2021, and until now, out of around 700 candidates and participants, 287 experts have been certified. The recruitment and training process consisted of the following steps until 2024:

- CV screening: the initial selection criteria for the accreditation experts were defined and announced in the respective calls on the TKTA website. The expert candidates who fit those criteria get shortlisted and receive an invitation to the next stage.
- Academic writing skills: TKTA carries out individual assessments of the candidates to evaluate their academic writing skills.
- Module 1 training: The online training lasts for two days and provides detailed information about the ESG requirements and quality assurance in higher education systems. There is a written assessment at the end of the training module, and those who achieve 60 points pass to the next stage.
- Module 2 training: The online training program continues for two days and provides detailed information about the rules and criteria for institutional and program accreditation. There is a written assessment at the end of the training module, and those who achieve 60 points pass to the next stage.
- Module 3 training: The online training program continues for two days and provides detailed information on how to conduct interviews and the work ethics of the accreditation commission. There is a written assessment at the end of the training module, and those who achieve 60 points pass the training and receive the expert certifications.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, TKTA conducted all training programs for the accreditation experts in online mode, and the practice continued after the pandemic ended. Although the training programs were rich in theoretical content and enabled the Agency to train

hundreds of experts in a short period of time, online training also created certain challenges, including the lack of hands-on experience and reduced opportunities for interactive and in-person discussions. Therefore, starting in 2024, based on the feedback from the experts, TKTA enhanced the training program by adding a "simulation exercise" to assess the experts' practical skills before certification.

In the simulation exercise, the participants are divided into mock accreditation commissions, each consisting of 5 to 8 members, and provided with a sample self-assessment report of a HEI to review. During the preparation process, the mock commissions are required to have online internal meetings and share the recordings with the Agency for evaluation. This part accounts for 20% of the total assessment.

After two weeks, they are invited to a simulation exercise, where two mock commissions interchangeably act as "accreditation commission" and "HEI representatives" roles. The candidates are evaluated to assess their following skills: "active listening," "communication," "analytical skills," "interviewing capabilities," and "understanding the accreditation criteria." The assessment process is open, and all TKTA staff are invited to join the process and assess the individuals, with the condition that the assessor should not have any personal relations with the candidates. The evaluation rubric, the list of mock commission members, and candidates' CVs are disseminated to all staff before the simulation activity. This part grants a maximum of 50% of the total assessment score.

After the simulations, the mock commissions are required to write an accreditation report based on the randomly assigned accreditation indicators. This part accounts for a maximum of 20% of the total assessment score. The candidate's self-assessment and peer evaluations contribute the remaining 10% of the score.

The ultimate goal of TKTA is to increase the capacity of the peer review experts in its pool by also involving the already certified experts in the simulation exercises before assigning them to the real accreditation process. This activity will also lead to the creation of a ranking of the experts based on their performance.

Critical Reflection and Challenges

- **Enhanced expert database:** The current expert database should be updated to enhance the structure, indicate the expert rankings, and link to expert CVs. Furthermore, the data should be updated, and the categorization of experts based on their specialties and stakeholder groups needs to be refined to make it more user-friendly.
- **Categorization of experts in the training process:** The current training program is not tailored for different categories of experts (e.g., education experts, scientific institution representatives, specialised experts, students, employers), which creates the main limitation in the process. TKTA could diversify the training paths of the expert candidates by adding general modules for all candidates and specific modules for different expert categories.
- **External Review Expert Database:** While TKTA has established a diverse pool of reviewers representing various stakeholder groups, with the increased number of accreditation processes, its need for external review experts will increase. Furthermore, ensuring adequate diversity in expertise, background, and perspectives among the reviewers is also necessary. Therefore, TKTA should continuously extend its pool by recruiting and developing new review experts from various stakeholders.

3.6 Composition of Accreditation Commissions

Accreditation Commissions are tailored to match the specific characteristics and profiles of each educational institution and program being evaluated. The members of the Accreditation Commission may include:

1. Local and international education experts;
2. Representatives from scientific institutions;
3. Specialized experts (in fields such as finance, information and communication technologies, etc.);
4. Students;
5. Employers.

Requirements for Members

Members of the Accreditation Commission must meet the following requirements:

1. Hold a higher education degree, preferably a PhD or higher degree;
2. Participate in training related to the evaluation of educational institutions;
3. Be knowledgeable about local and international accreditation processes;
4. Within the last two years have no contractual obligations with the educational institution being accredited;
5. Not be listed among individuals associated with the educational institution as per Article 49-1 of the Civil Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The roles and responsibilities of the members are defined according to the Statute of the Accreditation Commission, approved by the Agency, and confirmed through a contract between the member and the Agency.

Appointment and Reporting

The chairperson of the Accreditation Commission and members of the Accreditation Commission are appointed by the Agency. The chairperson prepares and submits the Final Report to the Agency based on the evaluations of the Commission members. If a member is found to be associated with the educational institution, fails to meet the contractual requirements, refuses to perform their duties as outlined in the Statute, or is unable to perform due to reasons beyond their control, their activities are terminated by the Agency, and a new member is appointed in their place.

Internal Quality Assurance Policy

While TKTA has established various processes related to internal quality assurance and applies them extensively in its operations, there is a need to formalize and document these practices under the relevant policies and procedures. Therefore, the development of a comprehensive internal quality assurance policy is on the agenda of the Agency. A robust internal QA policy should include core processes such as:

- Regular and systematic training and briefing of experts;
- Support for experts by coordinators in conducting site visits and drafting accreditation reports;

- Comprehensive feedback mechanisms from all individuals involved in the accreditation process;
- Analysis of feedback and monitoring of the implementation processes to identify areas for improvement.

Conflict of Interest

Any conflict of interest between the parties during the accreditation process is avoided through the service contracts that commission members sign before starting the process. The Agency also shares the list of commission members with the HEI and provides a period to report any conflict of interest that has not been disclosed by the commission member.

While TKTA uses comprehensive contracts with experts, addressing some aspects of conflict of interest, there are gaps in the prevention of bias based on previous or current associations with the institution under review. The current contracts partially address conflicts of interest, specifically restricting experts from procuring goods or services related to their consulting roles. However, they are insufficient in explicitly considering other potential conflicts, such as personal or professional proximity to the reviewed institution.

Critical Reflection and Challenges

1. **Enhance the Conflict-of-Interest Provisions:** Although the Agency mitigates potential conflicts of interest by requiring members of the accreditation commissions to sign service contracts, the risk of individual experts providing subjective or biased assessments remains. Therefore, TKTA should continuously enhance its expert training program. Moreover, the Agency should revise the service contracts for experts to explicitly address all potential conflicts of interest, including previous or current associations with the institution under review, ensuring impartiality and integrity in the accreditation process.
2. **Criteria for selecting experts for the accreditation commissions:** The current procedure to select and assign peer review experts to the accreditation commissions could be enhanced by developing more precise procedures. The aim should be not only selecting the “best-fit” experts but also avoiding over-reliance on the same experts for multiple processes and providing equal opportunities for the others to be involved. The Agency can keep its expert pool both active and interested in the process.

By addressing these challenges, TKTA can strengthen the effectiveness and credibility of the work undertaken by the Accreditation Commission, ensuring high-quality and unbiased evaluations of educational institutions and programs.

3.7 Complaints & Appeals

Complaints and Appeals Process

According to ESG 2.7, complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Both complaints and appeal procedures are prescribed in the national legislation. Once the Agency receives complaints from the applicant, HEI, it summons the Accreditation Commission to review the complaint and come up with a final decision within 5 days of the

final report submission. If the Accreditation Commission does not consent to comments provided by HEI, the latter may appeal.

The national accreditation rules stipulate an appeal procedure, and TKTA sets up an Appeal Commission. Based on comments made by HEI and hearings of both sides, the Appeal Commission is entitled to keep the final report as it is or make necessary changes.

Current Appeals Process

The Appeals Commission is a collegial body formed by the Agency to review complaints related to the activities of the Accreditation Commission. The Appeals Commission consists of an odd number of members, with a minimum of three members, appointed by the Agency. One member is designated as the chairperson by the Agency. The chairperson of the Accreditation Commission must participate in the hearings and report on the Commission's activities to the Appeals Commission. Based on the decision of the Appeals Commission, necessary changes are made to the final report, and the educational institution is informed accordingly.

The current appeals process can be explained through the four steps described further. Once the final report developed by the Accreditation Commission is uploaded to the e-system by the Agency, the educational institution has ten days to provide feedback on the report within the system. Afterwards, within five days of submitting the feedback, the educational institution and the Accreditation Commission discuss the final report. Following the discussion, if no agreement is reached on the final report between the educational institution and the Accreditation Commission, the matter is referred to the Appeals Commission for review within ten days, involving all parties. Depending on the decision of the Appeals Commission, necessary changes are made to the Final Report, and the educational institution is informed accordingly.

The Appeals Commission has the following jurisdictions:

1. Conduct investigations with the participation of complainants (or their authorized representatives), Agency members, Accreditation Commission members, and, if necessary, relevant officials from the Ministry and other associated entities.
2. Invite relevant officials and individuals to its meetings for explanations and clarifications.
3. Issue written instructions to rectify identified deficiencies and violations to the relevant authorised persons of the Agency and members of the Accreditation Commission.

Critical Reflection and Challenges

1. **Enhancement of the existing complaint procedure:** While TKTA has formalized its complaints and appeal procedure for its external quality assurance activities, there is a need for further enhancement and systematic analysis of complaints processes.

4. Priority actions

1	Title	Proposals for legislative amendments	
Objectives		Strengthen the autonomy of the Agency in administrative matters and enhance the accreditation process to comply with ESG	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Review the current legislative framework, including the “Rules for Accreditation of Educational Institutions”	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit, and Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
2	Develop the Statute for the selection and appointment of the Management Board	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit	Q4 2024
3	Prepare amendment proposals for the Accreditation Rules in consultation with the Ministry of Science and Education	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit, and Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
4	Draft a comprehensive, criteria-based procedural document for the selection, appointment, and dismissal of TKTA Board members	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit, and Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
5	Submit the compiled amendment proposals to relevant authorities for approval	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit, and Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
Outcomes		Comprehensive and up-to-date legislative framework that supports TKTA’s operational needs and practices	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Delays in approval from relevant authorities		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain regular communication with relevant authorities to expedite the approval process; - Provide detailed justifications and supporting documents to facilitate understanding and approval. 	
2	Title	Comprehensive stakeholder involvement in QA processes	

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Objectives		Enhance stakeholder engagement and involvement in QA processes	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Develop a stakeholder mapping for the Agency and interest-influence matrix	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
2	Develop policy for the stakeholder involvement to the QA processes	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q1 2025
3	Enhancement of feedback mechanisms from internal and external stakeholders	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Continuous
4	Empower stakeholders through workshops, round-table discussions, and seminars	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Continuous
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective and meaningful stakeholder engagement in QA processes; • Increased stakeholder representation in QA decision-making; • Improved QA processes through diverse Perspectives. 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Low participation in related activities		Conduct awareness campaigns, offer incentives	

3	Title	Streamline accreditation criteria based on stakeholder input	
Objectives		Enhance the clarity and efficiency of the external quality assurance activities, including accreditation criteria	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Review the accreditation criteria to identify the overlapping and redundant indicators	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q3 2024
2	Design and distribute surveys to higher education institutions and accreditation commissions to collect feedback	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q3 2024

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3	Conduct round-table discussions with the peer review experts, higher education representatives, and international experts to gather detailed input	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q3 2024
4	Draft revised accreditation criteria incorporating the input from the stakeholders	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
5	Present the revised criteria to the relevant decision-making bodies for approval	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
6	Update official accreditation guidelines and communicate changes to all stakeholders	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q2 2025
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streamlined accreditation criteria that are easier to implement in assessment; Improved understanding of the accreditation process by institutions and commissions; Increased satisfaction among stakeholders. 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
<p>Low level of stakeholder participation in the process</p> <p>Long response time from the decision-making authorities</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contacting the key units, such as QA units in higher education institutions; Communicating the aim of the project clearly with stakeholders; Ensuring the proposal is clear and structured enough to reduce the response time from the authorities. 	

4	Title	Documentation of internal quality assurance practices of TKTA	
Objectives		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document the internal quality assurance; practices that TKTA follows under specific policies and procedures; Identify, propose, and implement the best-practices aimed at enhancing the internal quality standards and overall effectiveness of TKTA. 	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Establish a working group to oversee the development process	All department and units	1
2	Gather and review existing internal quality assurance policies and procedures	All department and units	2

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3	Conduct internal audits and selfassessments to identify the gaps	All department and units	3
4	Create a detailed map of current practices, including processes, responsibilities, and workflows	All department and units	Q3 2024
5	Draft the relevant policy and procedures, and share it with the internal stakeholders to collect feedback	All department and units	Q4 2024
6	Revise the documents based on the feedback	All department and units	Q1 2025
7	Conduct training and disseminate information among the internal stakeholders on new QA policies and procedures	All department and units	Q2 2025
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced internal quality assurance framework with updated and clearly documented practices; Improved understanding and implementation of quality standards; More effective quality assurance system within TKTA. 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resistance to the new IQA policies and procedures by the internal stakeholders; The documentation of current practices or new policies may be incomplete or inaccurate; Delays in the development of the documents; Staff may not be adequately trained on new policies and procedures, leading to improper implementation. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicating the benefits of the policy and procedures; Keeping the documents simple and easy to understand for everyone; Ensuring in-depth review and validation of all documentation by multiple stakeholders, involvement of international expert to the process; Setting clear deadlines and milestones; Ensuring all staff and necessary stakeholders are involved to the training process, organizing simulations and tabletop exercises to increase staff readiness. 	

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5	Title	Enhancing the consistency of follow-ups for EQA activities	
Objectives		Develop strong follow-up mechanisms to ensure higher education institutions adhere to accreditation and audit recommendations.	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Perform an in-depth review of the current procedures and methodologies for the follow-up mechanisms	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q4 2024
2	Conduct surveys and employ other mechanisms to collect feedback from HEI's and other stakeholders regarding the existing follow-up practices	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q1 2025
3	Analyse the international best practises for conducting follow up analyses	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q1 2025
5	Enhance the follow-up mechanisms to oversee the implementation of action plans by higher education institutions in response to recommendations in the respective accreditation reports	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q1 2025
6	Plan and implement capacity-building activities for TKTA staff conducting follow-up activities	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q2 2025
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enhanced post-evaluation follow-up mechanisms to enhance the impact of the accreditation processes; ● Enhanced external quality assurance mechanism in higher education. 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incomplete or inaccurate assessment of the existing mechanisms; - Low response rates or feedback from HEIs and stakeholders in the process; - Lack of human resources for the implementation of enhanced follow-up mechanisms; - Lack of organisational willingness and support from the HEIs during the follow-up process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop and utilize a detailed checklist to ensure all aspects of the existing follow-up mechanisms are reviewed and validate the assessment results with the feedback from stakeholders; - Ensure the feedback mechanism and tools are concise, clear, and user-friendly to encourage stakeholder participation and set regular reminders to accelerate the process; - Keeping the documentations simple and easy to understand for everyone; - Schedule follow-up activities during less busy periods to avoid human resource scarcity; - Clearly articulate the benefits of the follow-up mechanisms to HEIs and address potential concerns.
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6	Title	Formalization of conditions for considering outcomes of cross-border accreditation by foreign agencies	
Objectives		Establish clear criteria and processes for recognition of cross-border accreditation done by foreign agencies, ensuring transparency and consistency in the evaluation of international QA reviews and aligning practices with international standards and best practices.	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Conduct research on international best practices in recognition of Cross-Border accreditation	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q4 2024
2	Define a formal approach and prepare necessary guidelines for considering outcomes of foreign reviews	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q1 2025
3	Share the developed guidelines with universities and foreign agencies conducting program accreditation in Azerbaijan	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q1 2025
4	Collect feedback from universities and foreign agencies on the guidelines	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q1 2025
5	Revise and finalize the guidelines based on feedback received	Training and methodology unit, Accreditation and licencing unit	Q1 2025
Outcomes		Clear and standardized criteria for considering foreign QA reviews	

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Risks	Mitigation actions
Resistance to new processes from internal stakeholders.	Conduct stakeholder consultations and provide training on new processes.

7	Title	Enhancement of conflict-of-interest provisions	
Objectives		Revise service contracts with experts and ensure impartiality and integrity of the accreditation process	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Review current service contracts and considering the feedback from stakeholders identify the areas for improvement	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit	Q3 2024
2	Approve new template for the service contracts	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit	Q4 2024
3	Sign revised service contracts with experts to be recruited to forthcoming accreditation commissions	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Continuous
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised service contract templates Increased impartiality and integrity of the accreditation process 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Some areas of conflict of interest might be overlooked		Consider the feedback of accreditation commission participants and TKTA coordinators regarding cases of conflict of interest	
Experts may disagree with signing the contract		Declare the importance of signing the agreement and explain the mandatory nature of contracting	

8	Title	Enhance the procedure for assigning experts from the peer review expert pool to the accreditation commissions	
Objectives		Avoiding the over-reliance on the same experts for multiple processes and providing opportunities for others to be involved	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Review the current selection procedure of peer review experts	Training and Methodology Unit	Q3 2024

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2	Review the involvement level of the peer review experts to understand the distribution of assignments and identify any patterns of over-reliance on specific individuals	Training and Methodology Unit	Q4 2024
3	Enhance the selection procedure of peer review experts for the review commissions by defining clear and specific criteria, ensuring the involvement of a wider pool of experts to the process	Training and Methodology Unit	Q1 2025
4	Provide continuous professional development opportunities for experts and keep them engaged even when there are no formal assignments	Training and Methodology Unit	Continuous
5	Regularly review the pool to analyse the engagement level of each expert	Training and Methodology Unit	Continuous
6	Cyclical review of the assignment procedure for continuous improvement	Training and Methodology Unit	Continuous
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Diverse pool of experts; ● Increased motivation and involvement of experts; ● In the long term, more effective outcomes (e.g., improved final reports produced by accreditation commission). 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Unwillingness of high-quality experts to become part of accreditation commissions due to high workload at primary workplaces		Contacting primary workplaces for creating sufficient opportunities to experts to get involved in the accreditation processes	

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9	Title	Enhancement of the peer review expert training program	
Objectives		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tailor the expert training program for different expert categories (e.g., education experts, scientific institution representatives, specialised experts, students, employers); - Conduct evaluations and feedback sessions - Update the training program based on the participants’ feedback; - Ensure the involvement of all review experts to the simulation exercises (exception are those who have participated in accreditation processes); - Ensure a standardized and consistent approach to quality assurance in all training modules; - Foster continuous improvement in QA processes. 	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Tailor the expert training program for different expert categories	Training and Methodology Unit	Q4 2024
2	Ensure the involvement of all existing review experts in the pool to the simulation exercises	Training and Methodology Unit	Q4 2024
3	Organize initial training sessions with updated programs	Training and Methodology Unit	Q1 2025
4	Conduct evaluations and feedback sessions	Training and Methodology Unit	Q2 2025
5	Update training program based on feedback	Training and Methodology Unit	Q2 2025
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Well-trained experts equipped with updated knowledge and practical skills; ● Improved quality assurance processes; ● Enhanced compliance with ESG standards. 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Inadequate evaluation and feedback		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop comprehensive evaluation and feedback mechanisms; - Encourage honest and constructive feedback from participants; - Analyse feedback systematically to inform updates. 	

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Delays in implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish a clear timeline and project plan; - Monitor progress regularly and adjust plans as needed; - Assign dedicated project managers for oversight.
Resistance and unwillingness from the review experts to participate in simulation exercises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communicate the objectives and process clearly, ensuring they understand that the simulation exercise is an opportunity to showcase their skills and knowledge; - Provide flexibility to adjust the timings to the needs of the experts; - Keeping the process simple and avoiding the perception of “competition” among the experts.

10	Title	Enhancement of peer review expert database	
Objectives		Improving the structure, user-friendliness of the peer review expert database and extending the pool by recruiting and developing new review experts from various stakeholders	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Collect the updated CVs from the peer review experts	Training and Methodology Unit	Q2 2024
2	Establish criteria for ranking experts based on their qualifications, experience, and previous performance	Training and Methodology Unit	Q3 2024
3	Integrate links to expert CVs in the database for easy access to detailed qualifications and experience	Training and Methodology Unit	Q3 2024
4	Enhance the categorization of the experts in the database based on the subject matters and stakeholder groups they represent	Training and Methodology Unit	Q3 2024
5	Develop a mechanism to keep expert information up to date	Training and Methodology Unit	Q3 2024
6	Review the database to identify gaps and recruitment needs in expertise and background	Training and Methodology Unit	Continuous (at least 4 times in a year, once in each quarter)

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7	Announce new calls to attract qualified experts to join the peer review process	Training and Methodology Unit	Continuous (at least 4 times in a year, once in each quarter)
8	Conduct the trainings for the peer review expert candidates based on the categories they represent (e.g. trainings for student representatives, academic staff, labour market representatives and so on)	Training and Methodology Unit	Continuous (at least 4 times in a year, once in each quarter)
Outcomes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced functionality of the peer review expert database; A broader and more diverse pool of review experts. 	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Experts may not submit updated CVs on time, leading to gaps in the database		Implement reminders and establish deadlines for CV submission.	
Inadequate criteria for expert rankings and biased implementation		Develop comprehensive metrics for qualifications, experience, and performance.	
Low interest to the new calls by the expert candidates		Use multiple channels to announce calls for new experts and streamline the application process	

11	Title	Enhancement of formal Complaints Procedure	
Objectives		Enforce a culture of continuous improvement in external quality assurance practices for further strengthening the alignment and compliance with ESG 2.7 by the means of enhancing the complaint procedure for external quality assurance activities, allowing the HEIs to submit complaints about the conduct of the process or the individuals carrying it out.	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	Review the current complaints procedure, conduct research on best practices for complaints procedures in QA	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit, Regulation of Legal Issues Unit	Q1 2025
2	Gather and use input from the stakeholders (e.g., students, HEI's) in the development process	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing unit, Regulation of Legal Issues Unit	Q1 2025

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3	Draft a comprehensive and clear complaints procedure outlining the complete process and step-by-step actions for escalating, managing, resolving complaints, and following up	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit, Regulation of Legal Issues Unit	Q2 2025
4	Communicate the procedure with the stakeholders, HEI's and TKTA staff	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q2 2025
5	Gather feedback from the stakeholders for continuous enhancement	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q3 2025
6	Implement mechanisms to monitor the results of complaints and record the actions taken to address them, ensuring both accountability and transparency	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q3 2025
7	Establish mechanisms for analysing the complaints to understand the systematic issues and areas for improvement in EQA activities	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	Q3 2025
Outcomes		Effective complaint procedure for external quality assurance activities; Enforced a culture of continuous improvement in external quality assurance practices; Better alignment and compliance with ESG 2.7.	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Reluctance from the stakeholders to escalate the complaints due to lack of understanding or trust		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making the procedure accessible, and disseminating clear information about the complaints procedure to stakeholders by using various channels (e.g., workshops, webinars, informational materials) to educate them on the process and its benefits; - Inform the stakeholders on the patterns and trends of the complaints received and specifically provide the resolutions on the topics. 	
Lack of the stakeholder input in the development phase of the procedure, thereby ending up with limited inclusiveness in the final document		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involve a diverse range of stakeholders in the development phase of the complaints procedure by using several channels and tools in the process - Set deadlines and regularly send reminders 	
Lack of resources in TKTA to handle the complaints effectively		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Streamline processes and use technology in the process 	

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5. Summary table

Action plan for quality assurance development in Azerbaijan’s higher education system						
	Priority action	Is it in ESG?	Activity steps (including status of implementation in case the activity was already identified in BFUG TPG C-QA)	Actors	Timeline	Desired outcome
1	Proposals for legislative amendment	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the current legislative framework, including the “Rules for Accreditation of Educational Institutions” and TKTA Charter Prepare amendment proposals for the Accreditation Rules in consultation with the Ministry of Science and Education Draft a comprehensive, criteria-based procedural document for the selection, appointment, and dismissal of TKTA Board members Submit the compiled amendment proposals to relevant authorities for approval. 	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit, and Accreditation and Licensing Unit	By 2024 Q4	Comprehensive and up-to-date legislative framework that supports TKTA’s operational needs and practices

Action plan for quality assurance development in Azerbaijan's higher

2	Comprehensive stakeholder involvement in QA processes	ESG 3.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop a stakeholder mapping for the Agency and interest influence matrix ● Develop policy for the stakeholder involvement to the QA processes ● Enhancement of feedback mechanisms from internal and external stakeholders ● Empower stakeholders through workshops, round-table discussions, and seminars 	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	By 2025 Q1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More effective and meaningful stakeholder engagement in QA processes ● Increased stakeholder representation in QA decision-making ● Improved QA processes through diverse perspectives
3	Streamline accreditation criteria based on stakeholder input	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review the accreditation criteria to identify the overlapping and redundant indicators ● Design and distribute survey to higher education institutions and accreditation commissions to collect feedback ● Conduct round-table discussions with the peer review experts, higher education representatives and international experts to gather detailed input ● Draft revised accreditation criteria incorporating the input from the stakeholders ● Present the revised criteria to the relevant decision-making bodies for approval ● Update official accreditation guidelines and communicate changes to all stakeholders. 	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	By 2025 Q2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Streamlined accreditation criteria that are easier to implement in assessment. ● Improved understanding of the accreditation process by institutions and commissions. ● Increased satisfaction among stakeholders

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4	Documentation of internal quality assurance practices of TKTA	ESG 2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish a working group to oversee the development process ● Gather and review existing internal quality assurance policies and procedures ● Conduct internal audits and self-assessments to identify the gaps ● Create a detailed map of current practices, including processes, responsibilities, and workflows ● Draft the relevant policy and procedures, and share it with the internal stakeholders to collect feedback ● Revise the documents based on the feedback ● Conduct training and disseminate information among the internal stakeholders on new QA policies and procedures. 	All department and units	By 2025 Q2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enhanced internal quality assurance framework with updated and clearly documented practices ● Improved understanding and implementation of quality standards ● More effective quality assurance system within TKTA.
5	Enhancing the consistency of follow-ups for EQA activities	ESG 2.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Perform an in-depth review of the current procedures and methodologies for the follow-up mechanisms ● Conduct surveys and employ other mechanisms to collect feedback from HEI's and other stakeholders regarding the existing follow-up practices ● Analyse the international best practices for conducting follow up analyses ● Enhance the follow-up mechanisms to oversee the implementation of action plans by HEI's in response to recommendations in the respective accreditation reports 	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	By 2025 Q2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enhanced post-evaluation follow-up mechanisms to enhance the impact of the accreditation processes ● Enhanced external quality assurance mechanism in higher education

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			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan and implement capacity-building activities for TKTA staff conducting follow-up activities 			
6	Formalization of Conditions for Considering Outcomes of Cross-Border Accreditation by Foreign Agencies	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct research on international best practices in recognition of Cross-Border accreditation Define a formal approach and prepare necessary guidelines for considering outcomes of foreign reviews Share the developed guidelines with universities and foreign agencies conducting program accreditation in Azerbaijan Collect feedback from universities and foreign agencies on the guidelines Revise and finalize the guidelines based on feedback received 	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	By 2025 Q2	Clear and standardized criteria for considering foreign QA reviews
7	Impartiality and integrity in the accreditation process through enhancement of conflict-of-interest provisions	ESG 2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review current service contracts and considering the feedback from stakeholders identify the areas for improvement Approve new template for the service contracts Sign revised service contracts with experts to be recruited to forthcoming accreditation commissions 	Regulation of Legal Issues Unit, Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit	By 2024 Q4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised service contract templates Increased impartiality and integrity of the accreditation process

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8	Enhance the procedure for assigning experts from the peer review expert pool to the accreditation commissions	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review the current selection procedure of peer review experts ● Review the involvement level of the peer review experts to understand the distribution of assignments and identify any patterns of over-reliance on specific individuals. ● Enhance the selection procedure of peer review experts for the review commissions by defining clear and specific criteria, ensuring the involvement of a wider pool of experts to the process ● Provide continuous professional development opportunities for experts and keep them engaged even when there are no formal assignments. ● Regularly review the pool to analyse the engagement level of each expert ● Cyclical review of the assignment procedure for continuous improvement 	Training and Methodology Unit	By 2025 Q1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Diverse pool of experts ● Increased motivation and involvement of experts ● In the long term, more effective outcomes (e.g., final reports produced by accreditation commission)
9	Enhancement of the peer review expert training program	ESG 2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tailor the expert training program for different expert categories ● Ensure the involvement of all existing review experts in the pool to the simulation exercises ● Organize initial training sessions with updated programs ● Conduct evaluations and feedback sessions ● Update training program based on feedback 	Training and Methodology Unit	By 2025 Q2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Well-trained experts equipped with updated knowledge and practical skills ● Improved quality assurance processes ● Enhanced compliance with ESG standards

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10	Enhancement of peer review expert database	ESG 2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collect the updated CVs from the peer-review experts ● Establish criteria for ranking experts based on their qualifications, experience, and previous performance ● Integrate links to expert CVs in the database for easy access to detailed qualifications and experience ● Enhance the categorization of the experts in the database based on the subject matters and stakeholder groups they represent ● Develop a mechanism to keep expert information up to date ● Review the database to identify gaps and recruitment needs in expertise and background ● Announce new calls to attract qualified experts to join the peer review process ● Conduct trainings for the peer review expert candidates based on the categories they represent (e.g. trainings for student representatives, academic staff, labour market representatives and so on) 	Training and Methodology Unit	Q3 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enhanced functionality of the peer review expert database ● A broader and more diverse pool of review experts
11	Enhancement of existing complaints procedure	ESG 2.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review the current complaints procedure, conduct research on best practices for appeals and complaints policies in QA ● Gather and use input from the stakeholders (e.g. students, HEI's) in the development process ● Draft a comprehensive and clear complaints procedure outlining the complete process and step-by-step actions for escalating, 	Training and Methodology Unit, Accreditation and Licensing Unit, Regulation of Legal Issues Unit	By 2025 Q3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Effective complaint procedure for external quality assurance activities ● Enforced a culture of continuous improvement in external quality assurance practices ● Better alignment and compliance with ESG 2.7

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			<p>managing, resolving complaints, and following up</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Communicate the procedure with the stakeholders, HEI's and TKTA staff● Gather feedback from the stakeholders for continuous enhancement● Implement mechanisms to monitor the results of complaints and record the actions taken to address them, ensuring both accountability and transparency● Establish mechanisms for analysing the complaints to understand the systematic issues and areas for improvement in EQA activities			
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6. Conclusion

The current action plan for strengthening the quality assurance development in Azerbaijan's higher education system represents a comprehensive strategic approach to enhance the alignment of the national quality assurance framework with ESG. In the long run, this plan is designed to advance the overall quality assurance of HEI's in Azerbaijan by systematically reinforcing essential aspects as legislative basis, stakeholder engagement, accreditation standards/criteria, internal quality assurance policies, follow-up mechanisms, cross-border accreditation by foreign agencies, peer review practices, and complaints handling.

By implementing this action plan, TKTA aims to achieve several key objectives as it follows:

- Strengthen the autonomy of the Agency in administrative matters and enhance the accreditation process comply with ESG.
- Enhance stakeholder engagement and involvement in quality assurance processes.
- Enhance the clarity and efficiency of the external quality assurance activities, including accreditation criteria.
- Document the internal quality assurance practices that TKTA follows under specific policies and procedures.
- Identify, propose, and implement the best-practices aimed at enhancing the internal quality standards and overall effectiveness of TKTA.
- Develop strong follow-up mechanisms to ensure higher education institutions adhere to accreditation and audit recommendations.
- Revise service contracts with experts and ensure impartiality and integrity of the accreditation process.
- Avoid the over-reliance on the same experts for multiple processes and provide opportunities for others to be involved.
- Establish clear criteria and processes for recognition of cross-border accreditation done by foreign agencies, ensuring transparency and consistency in the evaluation of international QA reviews and aligning practices with international standards and best practices.
- Tailor the expert training program incorporating simulation exercises for different expert categories (e.g., education experts, scientific institution representatives, specialized experts, students and employers) based on feedback from respective stakeholders for ensuring a standardized and consistent approach to quality assurance in all training modules and fostering continuous improvement in QA processes.
- Improve the structure, user-friendliness of the peer review expert database and extend the pool by recruiting and developing new review experts from various stakeholders.
- Enforce a culture of continuous improvement in external quality assurance practices for further strengthening the alignment and compliance with ESG 2.7 by the means of creating

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an effective complaint procedure for external quality assurance activities, allowing the HEI's to submit complaints about the conduct of the process or the individuals carrying it out.

Overall, this action plan is a significant step forward in the enhancement of a robust quality assurance system in Azerbaijan. It aligns with the broader strategic priorities, including the modernization of higher education and the alignment with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The successful implementation of this plan will not only enhance the quality of higher education in Azerbaijan but also contribute to the extended international recognition and collaboration in the higher education sector.

Annex I. Mapping against ESG Part 1

ESG Standards	Assessment Criteria for the Institutional Accreditation of Azerbaijani HEIs	Rules for the Accreditation of Educational Institutions
<p>1.1 Policy for quality assurance</p> <p>Institutions should have a policy for QA that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.</p>	<p><u>2.1. Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Policy</u></p> <p>2.1.1. The HEI has an internal quality assurance policy that has been designed with relevant stakeholders; 2.1.2. IQA policy is designed in simple and clear language; the provisions of the policy are realistic and feasible; 2.1.3. The HEI’s staff is aware of IQA Policy and shares it; 2.1.4. The scope of the quality assurance policy (degree programs, governance, infrastructure, quality indicators of the academic staff and students).</p> <p><u>2.2 IQA Mechanisms</u></p> <p>2.2.1. The HEI has a defined IQA system (IQA Commission, its structure, action plan, reports and etc.); 2.2.2. Relevant stakeholders (students, labour market representatives and etc.) have been involved in the IQA system of the HEI; 2.2.3. Action Plan of the IQA Commission is consistent with the goals and objectives set in HEI's Strategic Development Plan; 2.2.4. The implementation mechanisms of the IQA system follow PDCA (plan-do-check-act) cycle; 2.2.5. Roles and responsibilities for the IQA activities have been defined and allocated; 2.2.6. The action plan on HEI's IQA encompasses all main institutional activities (programs, faculties, academic and administrative staff, students, etc.); 2.2.7. The HEI has an accessible and updated Quality Assurance Guide; 2.2.8. Internal quality monitoring and evaluations encompass all main institutional activities; 2.2.9. Annual self-assessment reports on HEI's IQA system; 2.2.10. Action plan and annual reports on the implementation of given recommendations in the last institutional accreditation; 2.2.11. The HEI systematically collects feedback from relevant stakeholders.</p> <p><u>2.3. Quality Culture</u></p> <p>2.3.1. The rector and senior management have high ownership in the implementation, supervision, and effective communication of the IQA system; 2.3.2. IQ monitoring, follow-ups, and related improvements; 2.3.3. Input of HEI’s senior management in IQA activities and institutional sustainability; 2.3.4. Inter-institutional coordination and collaboration in IQA.</p>	

	<p><u>4.4. Academic Integrity Mechanisms</u> 4.4.1. The HEI has a defined policy on academic integrity and plagiarism; 4.4.2. The HEI has a defined procedure and guidance to prevent cheating and plagiarism; 4.4.3. Academic integrity mechanisms of the HEI encompass both academics and students.</p>	
<p>1.2 Design and approval of programmes Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA.</p>	<p><u>3.2 Study Programs</u> 3.2.1. Degree programs encompass all three cycles of higher education; 3.2.2. Programs are aligned with labour market demands and community needs; 3.2.3. Programs are designed in line with the Occupational Qualification Standards (OQS); 3.2.4. Programs are designed in line with the National Qualifications Framework (AzNQF); 3.2.5. Programs are designed in line with the defined program outcomes and content standards; 3.2.6. The workload of the programs is designed in line with ECTS; 3.2.7. Courses and their learning outcomes are aligned with program outcomes; 3.2.8. Weekly course load (class learning and out-of-class learning) is designed in line with program curriculum; 3.2.9. Program outcomes are accessible; 3.2.10. Labour market representatives are involved in design, evaluation, and update of the programs.</p> <p><u>3.3. Organization of Teaching Activities</u> 3.3.1. Curricula are designed in line with the ECTS; 3.3.2. Course information packages (course catalogues) are structured in academic years and semesters; 3.3.3. Curricula take into account the balance between the compulsory and elective courses; 3.3.4. Curricula take into account the balance between the field-specific and non-field specific courses; 3.3.5. The HEI has mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the compliance of courses' learning outcomes with program outcomes; 3.3.6. The HEI has mechanisms to monitor that the learning outcomes of the course are set in the syllabi; 3.3.7. Curricula and student workloads are designed in a manner that enables students to engage in extracurricular activities too; 3.3.8. Individual Study Plans (ISP) for the students that include the title of the courses, credits, and the course instructors; 3.3.9. The annual work plan of the program that incorporates course titles, credits, and anticipated student enrolment for each course; 3.3.10. The annual workload of the instructors is outlined in terms of the distribution of courses per semester and expected student enrolment numbers for each course; 3.3.11. Teaching and training activities (lectures, seminars, lab work, and practical exercises) take into account the needs and requirements of the course; 3.3.12. Advising services for students; 3.3.13. Supervision of students' independent works; 3.3.14. Organization and placement of internships (internship,</p>	

	<p>apprenticeship, field experience, etc.); 3.13.15. Organization and placement of practicums; 3.13.16. Organization of capstone projects; 3.13.17. Organization of thesis supervision and defence; 3.13.18. Organization of final exams; 3.13.19. Organization of Summer semesters; 3.13.20. Number of students failed to pass courses by academic years; 3.13.21. The ratio of failed students to the number of overall students; 3.13.22. Monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning activities, follow-ups, and related improvements.</p>	
<p>1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.</p>	<p><u>3.4. Teaching Methods & Techniques</u> 3.4.1. Innovative, creative, and interactive teaching methods and techniques used to help students achieve intended learning outcomes; 3.4.2. Innovative teaching methods and techniques include student-centred, competency-based, problem-based, theory-based, and applied learning approaches; 3.4.3. Innovative teaching methods and techniques are applied in all educational modalities; 3.4.4. Teaching methods and techniques focus on deep learning, motivation, engagement, and commitment of the students; 3.4.5. Teaching methods and techniques are adaptive to the individual characteristics of students and take into account the levels of higher education; 3.4.6. Teaching and learning processes are supported and enriched with technological opportunities and approaches; 3.4.7. Innovative teaching methods and techniques encourage interactive learning; 3.4.8. Monitoring and evaluation of teaching methods and techniques, follow-ups, and related improvements. <u>3.8. Student-Centred Education</u> 3.8.1. Students are involved in the design of individual study plans (ISP); 3.8.2. Students are free to choose elective courses; 3.8.3. Students are free to choose instructors and student assistants (tutors); 3.8.4. The HEI conducts periodic, continuous, comprehensive, and efficient student/alumni surveys; 3.8.5. Improvements and innovations made in response to the feedback and recommendations provided by students and alumni; 3.8.6. The student/alumni surveys have been conducted through different means and the results of the survey have been taken into account in the planning and decision-making process; 3.8.7. The HEI has different means and mechanisms to compile students' initiatives and complaints; 3.8.8. The HEI has student advisors (tutors) sufficient in number and competencies to follow the academic development of students, lead and answer their questions; 3.8.9. The HEI has various available means of communication between students and student advisors (face-to-face, online, etc.);</p>	

	<p>3.8.10. The HEI is aware of the needs of students with a disability and provides all necessary support to ensure that students with a disability can engage and learn; 3.8.11. The HEI is aware of the needs of socially vulnerable students and provides all necessary support to ensure that socially vulnerable students can engage and learn; 3.8.12. The HEI provides scholarship opportunities for students.</p> <p><u>3.6. Assessment of Students' Skills and Competencies & Issuance of Diplomas</u></p> <p>3.6.1. The HEI has defined procedures and guidelines for the assessment of skills and competencies; 3.6.2. Assessment criteria are measurable and reliable; 3.6.3. Students' assessments are carried out in different forms and methods (face-to-face, online, etc.); 3.6.4. The HEI ensures transparency and fairness in students' assessments; 3.6.5. Students' assessment takes into account the following: a) development of self-assessment skills b) development of motivation for self-learning c) improvement of teaching quality. 3.6.6. The HEI applies Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in students' assessments; 3.6.7. The HEI has defined a needs-based examination/assessment with respect to students with disability; 3.6.8. Mid-term and final exams, as well as assignments and projects, are aligned with and suitable to course objectives and ensure transparency, fairness, and competitiveness; 3.6.9. Final exams and the dissertation defence have been organized in compliance with national regulations; 3.6.10. Monitoring and evaluation of examinations and assessments, follow-ups, and related improvements; 3.6.11. The rules for graduation are accessible and have been designed in simple and clear language; 3.6.12. Diplomas and certificates are issued in line with national regulations.</p>	
<p>1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</p> <p>Institutions should consistently apply predefined and published regulations covering all phases of</p>	<p><u>3. Student Admission and Recognition of Prior Qualifications</u></p> <p>3.1.1. To order admission places, the HEI meets all requirements set in programs and standards; 3.1.2. The admission places order corresponds to the needs of the labour market; 3.1.3. Labour market representatives are involved in the formation of admission places order; 3.1.4. Prior learning and qualifications are recognized and credited.</p>	
<p>1.5 Teaching staff</p> <p>Institutions should assure themselves of the</p>	<p><u>3.7. Academic Staff</u></p> <p>3.7.1 The recruitment, promotion, and appointment criteria and processes for academic staff are defined and accessible to the public; 3.7.2. The HEI has defined the</p>	

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<p>competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.</p>	<p>criteria and has practices regarding incentives to improve academic and technological skills among academic staff; 3.7.3. The HEI provides systematic trainer-training activities (courses, workshops, seminars, etc.) for the academic staff in order to assist them in learning and implementing interactive and active teaching methods, and distance teaching processes; 3.7.4. The academic staff participates in professional development programs and trainings; 3.7.5. The academic staff participates in international professional development programs and trainings; 3.7.6. The HEI has defined the criteria and has practices regarding the evaluation of innovative and creative teaching skills of academic staff; 3.7.7. The HEI has fair and transparent criteria and practices for the distribution of course loads among academic staff; 3.7.8. Student-to-faculty ratio (1/15); 3.7.9. Full-time academic staff makes up 70% of the total academic staff; 3.7.10. The HEI has reasonable justification for involving adjunct academic staff; 3.7.11. The HEI has a transparent, efficient, and fair performance appraisal mechanism and practices (appreciation, recognition, and rewarding of the teaching performance of academic staff); 3.7.12. Academic recruitment in the HEI prioritizes the graduates of "The State Program on the education of Azerbaijani youth abroad" and graduates of top HEIs by reputation.</p>	
<p>1.6 Learning resources and student support Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.</p>	<p><u>3.5. Teaching & Learning Resources</u> 3.5.1 The HEI has a learning management system (LMS) that fully corresponds to and addresses its needs in teaching, learning, and assessment; the LMS is user-friendly, has synchronous, and asynchronous learning, enriched content development, and also measurement and evaluation, and in-service training opportunities; 3.5.2. Classrooms and studios have sufficient technological equipment both in quantity and quality (projectors, computers, smart boards, etc.); 3.5.3. The HEI has an electronic attendance ledger that keeps records of students' attendance and active participation; 3.5.4. Digital services and technical support of the HEI are in compliance with the needs and objectives of the program; 3.5.5. All computers in classes, studios, and labs have high-speed internet access; 3.5.6. The capacity of classrooms and auditoriums corresponds to the actual student population; 3.5.7. The HEI has offices and workplaces sufficient in quantity and quality for academic and administrative staff; 3.5.8. The HEI improves and adjusts the service of the library (on campus and digital) to the current demands and future trends; 3.5.9. Growth pattern of books (printed books and e-books) added to the library collection during the last 5 years; 3.5.10. The library collection and</p>	

	<p>its growth pattern during the last 5 years fits with the language of instruction; 3.5.11. The growth pattern of allocated finance for scientific/academic research database subscriptions 3.5.12. The HEI monitors the utilization and refurbishment of teaching and learning resources; 3.5.13. Teaching and learning resources of the HEI are suitable in quantity and quality, accessible, and utilized by students; 3.5.14. The HEI has teaching and learning resources adjusted to the needs of students with disability; 3.5.15. Monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning resources, follow-ups, and related improvements; 3.5.16. The HEI provides necessary financial and administrative support to social, cultural, and sporting activities; 3.5.17. The HEI provides student psychological and counselling services.</p> <p><u>6.1. Education Infrastructure</u></p> <p>6.1.1. The HEI's facilities (buildings, classrooms, auditoriums, etc.) correspond with state norms and standards; 6.1.2. The HEI has a library to support its learning and research activities; 6.1.3. The HEI has adequate and appropriate facilities in line with the needs of programs; 6.1.4. The HEI has labs that fit with the needs of programs; 6.1.5. The HEI has suitable premises and equipment to conduct industrial and pre-diploma internships; 6.1.6. The HEI has suitable infrastructure for distance teaching and learning; 6.1.7. The HEI has accessible transportation; 6.1.8. The Education infrastructure of the HEI is accessible, recognized, and utilized by students; 6.1.9. The educational infrastructure of the HEI is adjusted to the needs of students with disability; 6.1.10. The HEI has canteens and cafeterias; 6.1.11. The HEI has dormitories; 6.1.12. The HEI has suitable medical services; 6.1.13. The HEI has suitable IT services; 6.1.14. Monitoring and evaluation of education infrastructure, follow-ups, and related improvements.</p>	
<p>1.7 Information management</p> <p>Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.</p>	<p><u>3.10. Career Services & Alumni Coordination System</u></p> <p>3.10.1. The HEI has a centre for career planning and development; 3.10.2. The HEI provides career counselling services to its students and alumni; 3.10.3. The HEI has an alumni tracking system; 3.10.4. The HEI evaluates the satisfaction of students with the quality of teaching and skills acquired; 3.10.5. The HEI has an alumni networking and coordination system.</p> <p><u>5.4. Information Management System</u></p> <p>5.4.1. The HEI has an Information Management System and defined procedures for it; 5.4.2. The functions of the Information Management System of the HEI include</p>	

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	<p>acquiring, saving, updating, processing, evaluating, and sharing information; 5.4.3. The roles and responsibilities of the administrative units in the Information Management System have been defined; 5.4.4. Teaching and learning processes have been digitalized in the HEI; 5.4.6. The Information Management System is accessible to students and has been utilized; 5.4.7. The Information Management System is integrated with the quality management processes; 5.4.8. The Information Management System is integrated with the Centralized Information Management System of the Ministry of Science and Education; 5.4.9. The HEI ensures digital security, data privacy, and reliability of the Information Management System.</p>	
<p>1.8 Public information Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.</p>	<p><u>5.5. Public Relations</u> 5.5.1. The HEI has an official website; 5.5.2. The website of the HEI provides accurate, up-to-date, and relevant information; 5.5.3. In addition to the official webpage, the HEI has different means of public disclosure and accountability; 5.5.4. The HEI has an action plan for public disclosure and accountability; 5.5.5. Public disclosure and accountability practices provide sufficient means for relevant stakeholders to assess the institutional effectiveness of the HEI; 5.5.6. Monitoring and evaluation of HEI's public disclosure and accountability practices, follow-ups, and related improvements.</p>	
<p>1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.</p>	<p><u>3.9. Monitoring and Up-date of Programs</u> 3.9.1 The HEI has mechanisms and an action plan for monitoring and evaluation of programs; 3.9.2. The monitoring and evaluation of programs are designed in a way to be able to assess that objectives and learning outcomes are performed as planned for each program and course; 3.9.3. The HEI systematically and periodically evaluates the impact of the programs' monitoring on the development of internal quality assurance; 3.9.4. Each program has annual self-evaluation reports (evaluation with a focus on program outcomes); 3.9.5. Program updates and improvements take into account the labour market demands and the community needs.</p>	

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<p>1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance</p> <p>Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.</p>		<p>3.8. Every 5 years the educational institution undergoes the accreditation evaluation.</p>
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