



**REPUBLIC BULGARIA – COUNCIL OF MINISTERS**  
**NATIONAL EVALUATION AND ACCREDITATION AGENCY**

Member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ENQA  
NEAA is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

Sofia 1113, 125 Tsarigradsko shosse Blvd, bl. 5, tel. +359 2/807 7811, fax: +359 2/971 2068

Reg №. 279.....

Date. 10.02.2020.

**To Dr. Christoph Grolimund,**  
**President of ENQA**

**Dear Dr. Grolimund,**

Herein you will find attached the Follow-up Report on the implementation of the recommendations, made in the decision of the Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) from 22 February 2018. This decision confirmed the renewal of the membership of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) in the ENQA. The Follow up report was adopted at a meeting of the NEAA Accreditation Council on 30.01.2020 (Minutes No. 3).

We are looking forward to the ENQA progress visit.

**Yours sincerely,**

**Prof. Dr Petya Kabakchieva**

**President of NEAA**



## FOLLOW-UP REPORT

on implementing the recommendations in the decision of the Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) from 22 February 2018, confirming the renewal of the membership of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) in ENQA

### 1. Introduction

This follow-up report is an overview of the implementation of the five areas for development reflected in the ENQA Board's decision of 22 February 2018 on the renewal of NEAA's membership in ENQA. The Accreditation Council (AC) of NEAA reiterates its conviction of the importance of the ENQA visit as another opportunity for fruitful cooperation. Guided by the goal of improving the external review process and applying its new function to track progress, ENQA has a positive influence on NEAA to be an active participant in improving the quality of Bulgarian higher education. This fact is confirmed by the Agency's specific work on the implementation of ENQA's recommendations made in the period 2018-2020. The measures taken to fulfil them are developed in the supplemented and updated Action Plan <https://www.neaa.government.bg/about-us/osigurjavane-na-kachestvoto> on the implementation of the NEAA Program for the application of "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)". The Plan envisages activities through which NEAA will meet the relevant requirements for the five areas for development identified by ENQA. The draft report was drawn up by a working group, approved by the AC with representatives of the Quality Assurance Commission (QAC), and was adopted by the AC on 30.01.2020.

### 2. Implementation of the areas for development

The section describes the implementation of the five areas for development. The statement is presented as a follow-up report, as required by the Board of Directors of ENQA in its letter of 12 March 2018 to the President of NEAA.

#### Under ESG 3.1 Quality assurance activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

NEAA is encouraged to fully support its overall and complex operations when reviewing its current Strategic Plan over the coming period. The revised Strategic Plan should, in particular, enable the Accreditation Council (in cooperation with the Secretary-General) to streamline resources, operations efficiently and effectively, reflecting the Agency's mission. NEAA is advised to consider expanding the Accreditation Council to ensure greater stakeholder involvement in the Agency's governance. If this requires a legal change, NEAA should proactively outline possible ways forward and take into account the experience of restructuring its Standing Committees, which now, e.g. include students as members. Besides, NEAA should



strive for the least formalised procedures regarding the current ad hoc stakeholder consultation at the working level by the Accreditation Council.

The main priorities of NEAA in the period 2018 – 2023, elaborated in its new strategy <https://www.neaa.government.bg/images/files/Strategia-NAOA-208-2023.pdf> are aimed at strengthening the position of NEAA as an active guarantor of compliance with the quality standards both in the Republic of Bulgaria and in the European Higher Education Area; as well as enhancing the culture of quality in the higher education system. In the process of fulfilling its mission and public responsibility, the Agency has endeavoured to streamline the resources available and the accreditation procedures defined by the Higher Education Act (HEA) by enhancing its cooperation with stakeholders. NEAA initiated and supported legal changes that institutionalise as a lasting policy the Agency's practice of students and staff users to be full members in its composition and work. With the amendments to the HEA (November 2018), the membership of the Standing Committees by areas of higher education was expanded to include persons from professional and branch organisations, employers' and students' associations. <https://www.neaa.government.bg/homepage/94-balgarski/about-us/struktura-na-naoa/207-postojanni-komisii>.

In connection with the implementation of the content of the said area, the AC decided to use the capacity and extensive experience of practitioners by setting up an Advisory Board (AB) and adopted its Rules of Procedure.

[https://www.neaa.government.bg/images/files/pravilnik\\_konsultativen\\_savet.pdf](https://www.neaa.government.bg/images/files/pravilnik_konsultativen_savet.pdf).

The Board includes representatives from professional, branch organisations, employers' and students' associations. As an auxiliary expert body, it will support the AC's activities on issues related to vocational training and student' realization in the internal and European markets; analyses of the trends in the development of higher education. It will develop the improvement of communication, cooperation and interaction of NEAA with professional and branch organisations and other issues raised by the AC of NEAA.

The activities of the established Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) continue. [https://www.neaa.government.bg/images/files/SUKO/PravilaZaDeinosttaNaKomissiaVOK\\_akt2\\_015.pdf](https://www.neaa.government.bg/images/files/SUKO/PravilaZaDeinosttaNaKomissiaVOK_akt2_015.pdf)

As an auxiliary body to the AC, the QAC and its internal audit team consider the possibilities for improving the Agency's work; analyse issues for optimising part of the accreditation procedures and reducing the administrative burden for higher education institutions (HEI). The question of the services electronization offered by the Agency has been systematically raised. Not only representatives of HEIs and scientific organisations, but also students and staff users are included in the renewed composition of the QAC.

All NEAA's Rules of Procedure can be viewed at:

<https://www.neaa.government.bg/normativna-baza/pravilnici>



NEAA regularly supplements its database of experts, including representatives of the academia, industry and employers' organisations, students and international experts. For their active participation in the accreditation activity, the Expert Selection Procedure was amended, updated and adopted by the AC <https://www.neaa.government.bg/99-balgarski/about-us/osigurjavane-na-kachestvoto/225-procedura-za-podbor-na-eksperti>

Expert panels	2018	2019	January 2020
Total number of EP	248	279	35

The AC has approved as part of the EPs students, doctoral students, users of staff and international experts as follows:

Expert panels	2018	2019	January 2020
Students in the membership of the EP	95	110	10
PhD students in the membership of the EP	128	145	20
Staff users in the membership of the EP	13	40	10
International experts in membership of the EP	17	18	3

To objectively assess the application of ESG in its practice, NEAA held seminars, conferences and meetings with representatives of the academia and with stakeholders, members and experts of the Standing Committees by areas of higher education.

<https://www.neaa.government.bg/#%D1%81%D1%8A%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%8F>

Without listing all the activities for the period 2018-2020, it is worth noting the seminar on the topic: "Analysis of the Implementation Results of the New NEAA Criterion System in Compliance with ESG" with the predominant participation of the National Student Representation Council, held in the city of Veliko Tarnovo; the meeting with Rector's of HSs and representatives of branch organisations on the new Criterion System and its compliance with ESG; the conference with international participation on "Perspectives and Challenges to Teacher Education in the 21st Century" with a discussion on the quality of training of pedagogical specialists in the higher education system.

<https://www.neaa.government.bg/homepage/106-balgarski/novini/711-naoa-organizirana-nacionalna-konferencija-na-tema-perspektivi-i-predizvikatelstva-pred-pedagogicheskoto-obrazovanie-prez-21-vek>

The analysis made after the discussions showed that HSs and users of staff as a whole positively evaluate the application of the ESG and the Criterion System, developed by the NEAA. The accreditation procedures meet the requirements for independence and transparency and are carried out by competent Bulgarian and foreign experts. It was emphasised that the Agency successfully affirms the European standards in harmony with the national academic tradition. It



was pointed out that all the decisions of the AC and of the Standing Committees by areas of higher education, as well as summaries of their reports and reports of Expert groups are published in time on NEAA website, and NEAA sticks to the principles of publicity and accountability. Still, there is a need of optimisation of the assessment methodology by supplementing it with quantitative indicators adequate to the ESG assessment criteria. There is a clear trend towards substantial compliance to ESG by HSs, which are striving to implement the new quality assurance criteria as part of their strategic management.

**These meetings also highlighted issues that complicate the accreditation process due to some statutory restrictions. To overcome them, NEAA actively participated in the development of the amendments to the HEA and suggested ESGs to be legally recognised in the accreditation. With the purpose to optimise the accreditation procedures and approve the differentiated assessment of the quality of education at HSs, the following changes will be introduced in the amendments to the HEA:**

- **initial** institutional accreditation for a newly opened or transformed higher education institution, which goes through an assessment of all criteria related to the application of the European standards for quality assurance of the education offered;
- **subsequent** institutional accreditation, which is reduced to a higher school (HS) which has already received ESG compliance accreditation and the evaluation is focused mainly on taking into account the results of its education in the professional fields and specialties of the regulated professions;
- **the focus now is put on the program accreditation, which will be held every four years.**

It is proposed to remove the separate, individual program accreditation procedure for PhD programs, which will be evaluated in the relevant professional field.

Thus, with its proactive action, NEAA implements the need for more effective legal accreditation procedures as a new opportunity to validate the ESG and enhance quality assurance processes in education.

### **Under ESG 3.5 Resources**

NEAA is advised to put in place processes to further develop staff competencies concerning the needs of quality assurance professionals.

NEAA is aware of the responsibility for the implementation of the recommendation made for the future development of the professional competences of the administrative staff, the members of the Standing Committees by areas of higher education and the members of the expert panels for quality assurance. The AC seeks to address the significant staffing problem of the Agency related to the limited number of experts from the specialised administration on full-time employment, i. e. on basic labour contracts, as most of them work on civil contracts. The members of the AC are convinced that the availability of experts assigned on a basic



employment contract is a prerequisite for their sustainable career development and training. Therefore, NEAA continues its endeavour this issue to be resolved by the MES as the primary authority. Various opportunities are used for training the experts in the relevant timetable of the Institute of Public Administration, participation in training seminars, conferences at home and abroad. The ongoing mobility in foreign agencies contributes to the exchange of positive experiences and good practices. The changes made by the AC to the Standing Committees by areas of higher education have achieved gender equality, with the ratio of male to female AC members, SC members and NEAA's administration employees, as follows:

- Accreditation Council: 7 men and 3 women;
- Chairpersons of the Standing Committees: 5 men and 4 women;
- Members of the Standing Committees by areas of higher education (appointed under civil contracts): 31 men and 34 women;
- General and specialised administration employees: 5 men and 12 women;

**In view of the efficiency and transparency of the accreditation process, upon the proposal of NEAA in the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplement to the HEA, the accreditation will be supported by electronic means through the electronic platform developed for the purpose, whose functioning should be introduced within two years from passing the Law.**

#### **Under ESG 2.4 Peer-Review Experts**

Following the recommendation made during the last ENQA review, NEAA is advised to expedite the development of strategies to involve foreign experts and other supporters (e.g. from the business, professional organisations and employers) in its procedures. This task, of course, requires effort from all stakeholders (Ministry of Education and Science, higher education institutions).

NEAA fulfils the recommendation to expand the participation of business stakeholders, employers and professional organisations, as well as foreign experts, in addition to the representatives of the academic staff in the Expert panels' composition. NEAA's activity in this respect is described in detail in the section concerning ESG 3.1.

The selection of the experts and the interaction, especially with foreign experts is a permanent task related to financing problem, the solution of it requires the efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science and the HS. Students, PhD students are members of the Expert panels, and most of the groups include representatives from branch organisations. Despite the difficulties, mainly of financial nature, NEAA involves international experts in every institutional accreditation procedure. For the reporting period, the number of international experts participating in the procedures for institutional accreditation is respectively thirteen in 2017; seventeen in 2018, and eighteen in 2019. These experts are selected from the nominated by the AC experts.

<https://www.neaa.government.bg/99-balgarski/about-us/osigurjavane-na-kachestvoto/225-procedura-za-podbor-na-eksperti>



NEAA responsibly approaches the need to rationalise its resources, seeking ways and means for a more productive dialogue with the Council of Rectors, the trade union organisation “Higher Education and Science”, the Union of Bulgarian Teachers, the National Representation of Students, with various branch, professional and employers' associations. The participation of their representatives in all standing committees and expert groups, in which the stakeholders are full members, the introduced auxiliary bodies to the AC, are all steps that will be followed in the future development of NEAA.

The participation of the Agency in the international project *Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities* is also related to the enhancement of the interaction of NEAA with various stakeholders. The project partners are the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Association of Institutions for Higher Education (EURASHE), the European Student Union (ESU) and five quality assurance agencies in higher education - Romania (ARACIS), Bulgaria (NEAA), Moldova (ANACEC), Denmark (DAI) and France (HCERES). The project, lasting 24 months (May 2019 - April 2021), is funded by the Erasmus + program and is coordinated by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Romania.

## **ESG 2.6 Reporting**

NEAA is encouraged to review its current practice that the Expert panel’s report is only reflected in the Standing Committee’s report (but not published as such).

NEAA complies with the recommendations of ENQA to list the participants in the Expert panels in the structure of the Standing Committees’ reports. The reports of the Expert panels are published on the Agency's website depending on the type of the procedure.

<https://www.neaa.government.bg/akreditirani-institucii/visshi-uchilischa>

The Agency also addresses the Review panel's recommendation to highlight good practices in training at the higher schools, for this purpose using also summarised reports on professional fields <https://www.neaa.government.bg/publikacii/dokladi>, as well as other forms of presenting relevant positive aspects.

## **Under ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals**

NEAA is advised to revise and clarify the role of its Committee of Appeal as a Complaints Committee, especially when it comes to student complaints, and to transparently inform third parties about the complaints and appeals procedures available, as it can be seen on its website.

NEAA continued its efforts to clarify the role and to improve the work of the Committee, reviewing its status. The Committee is referred to as the Complaints and Alerts Committee, not as an Appealing one – this was the decision of AC who revised its regulations. They are published on the Agency’s website.

<https://www.neaa.government.bg/images/files/pravilnik-komisiq-jalbi.pdf>

The status of the Complaints and Alerts Committee is of an advisory body to the AC. It consists of five members, three of which are academics, nominated by the National Trade Union for Higher Education and Science, one is a student and one - representative of NEAA. The Committee's term of office is for three years, but not more than two terms. The functions of the committee are:

- to consider complaints and alerts of violations in the accreditation procedures and comment them. These complaints cannot change the already taken decisions of the Accreditation Council, respectively of the Agency's Standing Committees, but should be checked in future procedures.
- to consider complaints and alerts of members of the academic staff, students and doctoral students of higher education institutions and scientific organisations and express opinions and recommendations on them, in case of:
  - discrepancy between the public disclosure of a higher school's policy to ensure the quality of training with the actual course of the education process;
  - disrespect for student opinion regarding the organisation and functioning of the internal quality assurance system.

The compliance with the recommendations on complaints and alerts by the higher education institutions and scientific organisations is to be taken into account in the next evaluation and accreditation procedure, or post-accreditation monitoring and control.

The Commission presents the adopted opinions and recommendations to the AC and reports periodically or upon request to the AC.

**In conclusion:** NEAA considers the implementation of the recommendations in the areas for development identified by ENQA as an essential condition for improving the quality of Bulgarian higher education. It will continue to uphold and refine its actions in implementing these recommendations. NEAA has the will, through dialogue and effective interaction with ENQA, to continue to establish itself as a factor in the enlargement of the European Higher Education Area.

**Prof. Dr Petya Kabakchieva**

**President of NEAA**





## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AC</b>	Accreditation Council
<b>AA</b>	Agricultural Academy
<b>BAS</b>	Bulgarian academy of sciences
<b>HE</b>	Higher education
<b>HS</b>	Higher school (incl. plural)
<b>EG</b>	Expert group (incl. plural)
<b>EQAR</b>	European quality-assurance register for higher education
<b>ENQA</b>	European association of quality assurance of higher education
<b>EURASHE</b>	European Association of Institutions for Higher Education
<b>ESU</b>	European Student Union
<b>ESG</b>	European standards and guidelines
<b>SC</b>	Standing committee (incl. plural)
<b>SO</b>	Science organization (incl. plural)
<b>HEA</b>	Higher education act
<b>HEI</b>	Higher education institution
<b>MES</b>	Ministry of education and science
<b>NEAA</b>	National evaluation and accreditation agency
<b>PAMC</b>	Post-accreditation monitoring and control
<b>QAC</b>	Quality Assurance Commission