

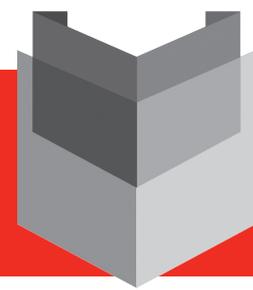
The National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education

July 2015

Contents

Message from CEO	2
Foreword	3
Glossary	4
1. Executive Summary	5
2. Background and Justification	7
3. Principles of the Framework	14
4. Applicability of the Framework	16
5. The IQA Standards	17
6. Standards for Quality Audits	20

Message from the CEO



As the competent authority for licensing, accreditation and quality assurance of further and higher education in Malta, the National Commission for Further and Higher Education is committed to keep on ensuring good quality education for the best interest of the students. This is possible through law enforcement and continuous recommendations to the government for further improvement.

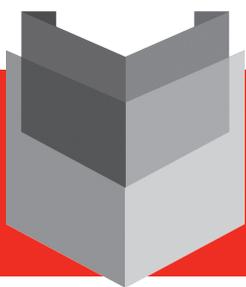
Quality assurance in further and higher education is very important to guarantee transparency and efficiency. This helps to create a trustworthy local education system, for the benefit of both national and international students. In addition, quality assurance is the backbone of any National Qualifications Framework. This ensures the portability of qualifications across European Member States, encourages added mobility in terms of employment as well as internationalisation. Having the Malta Qualifications Framework referenced to the European Qualifications Framework is also an added advantage since students studying in Malta would have the same levels of knowledge, skills and competences required in the EU.

Thanks to the National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education, the Commission is further strengthening quality assurance in Malta by providing guidelines and assistance to all licensed institutions as well as prospective ones. This will ensure the same level of due diligence across different forms of educational institutions, thus raising standards of higher education in Malta and stimulating further investment in the education sector for the benefit of the wider Maltese economy.

NCFHE commits itself to create more awareness among educational institutions on the importance of good quality education and also provide them with the necessary assistance to build a robust internal quality assurance system. This will facilitate monitoring of quality within the parameters of the Framework and move towards a pro-quality culture, further reassuring not only students, but also employers and teaching professionals.

I would like to thank all the project partners and NCFHE employees for their support and dedication towards this mission. Special thanks also go to all those educational institutions licensed by the NCFHE who actively participated during various consultation sessions. I augur that this good working relationship continues further since collaboration and dialogue amongst all stakeholders can address arising challenges and maximise opportunities in the sphere of further and higher education.

Ms Edel Cassar
Chief Executive Officer



Foreword

The National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education is a key deliverable of ESF Project 1.227 'Making Quality Visible'. The partners of Project are:

- The National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) (leading partner)
- The University of Malta
- The Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)
- The Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS)
- The Directorate for Lifelong Learning (DLLL)
- The Employment and Training Corporation (ETC)
- ACQUIN, the transnational partner of the project and an established cross-border Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency based in Germany.

Through this project the NCFHE is implementing its legal obligation to set up a national external quality audit system that complements the internal quality assurance mechanisms of individual further and higher education entities. The Framework provides the conceptual context for this work, and situates it in the paramount need to develop a national quality culture.

In the first stage the scope of the Framework is to implement the provisions on internal quality assurance and periodic external quality audits (EQAs) in Subsidiary Legislation 327.433. The Framework refers to further, higher and adult formal education provision in both state and non-state sectors.

The provider and programme/course accreditation procedures are presently being revised. At a second stage, the Framework shall be expanded to incorporate adapted provider and programme/course accreditation procedures and adapted EQA procedures for all categories of entities.

In the third stage of the development of the Framework, it will be reviewed to consider how best to incorporate quality assurance requirements for informal and non-formal learning.

This three-stage approach will allow the Framework to be fine-tuned with the benefit of experience.

The Framework was launched in a Consultative Conference with stakeholders on the 25th July 2014 that ushered in a three-month consultation period. As a result of the feedback received, the Framework was revised in October 2014, and revised again after the end of the three pilot EQAs of the University of Malta, MCAST and ITS that were at the centre of ESF Project 1.227. The present publication now covers the background to the Framework and the resulting Internal and External Quality Assurance Standards. The procedures for the undertaking of EQAs are included in the Manual of Procedures that has been issued as a separate publication.

I would like to thank my colleagues within the partner institutions of the ESF Project 1.227; NCFHE Chairman Mr Martin Scicluna and the Board members of the NCFHE; NCFHE CEO Ms Edel Cassar; Professor John Portelli, Chairman of the Quality Assurance Committee within the NCFHE, and the members of the Committee; the many stakeholders and colleagues nationally and internationally who gave invaluable feedback; as well as my colleagues within the NCFHE, for their support in this project and in finalising this publication.

Mr. Sandro Spiteri
Head, Quality Assurance Unit

Glossary

APQRU	Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit, within the PVC
AQA	Austrian Agency for Quality, Austria
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
DLLL	Directorate for Lifelong Learning
ECTS	European Credit transfer System
ECVET	European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management
ENQA	European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Audit
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocation Education and Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESF	European Social Funds
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines
ETC	Employment and Training Corporation
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation
ITS	Institute for Tourism Studies
MCAST	Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology
MQF	Malta Qualifications Framework
NCFHE	National Commission for Further and Higher Education
OAQ	Centre of Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Switzerland
PVC	Programme Validation Committee, University of Malta
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency, UK
QALLL	Quality Assurance in LifeLong Learning with a Focus on Vocational Education and Training and adult education
QMS	Quality Management System
RAQAPE	Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University , Rumania
VET	Vocational Education and Training



1. Executive Summary

- 1.1** The National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education is a key deliverable of ESF Project 1.227 'Making Quality Visible', which is led by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE).
- 1.2** In the first stage the scope of the Framework is to implement the provisions on internal quality assurance and periodic external quality audits (EQAs) in Subsidiary Legislation 327.433. The Framework refers to further, higher and adult formal education provision in both state and non-state sectors.
- 1.3** The provider and programme/course accreditation procedures are presently being revised. At a second stage, the Framework shall be expanded to incorporate adapted provider and programme/course accreditation procedures and adapted EQA procedures for all categories of entities.
- 1.4** In the third stage of the development of the Framework, it will be reviewed to consider how best to incorporate quality assurance requirements for informal and non-formal learning.
- 1.5** As a result of the feedback received, the present publication now covers the background to the Framework and the resulting Internal and External Quality Assurance Standards. The procedures for the undertaking of EQAs are included in the Manual of Procedures that has been issued as a separate publication.
- 2.1** As part of the ESF Project the NCFHE conducted a Scoping Exercise with both state and non-state further, higher and adult formal education service providers, that was intended to explore the complexity of provision and the state of preparedness and practice of providers in terms of quality assurance. This Scoping Exercise took the form of one-to-one interviews from January to March 2014 with 76 % of all provisional license holders at the time, as well as 63% of regular license holders¹. Interviewed entities included the Project partners and the ETC.
- 2.2 The Scoping visits indicated that:**
- providers approved of the development of an overarching Further and Higher Quality Assurance Framework, with the European Standards and Guidelines, at its heart;
 - with very few exceptions, all providers had a good measure of explicit or implicit internal quality assurance procedures in place;
 - providers could be categorised according to the five types of clients they serviced and the seven types of courses they provided;
 - there is a wide spectrum of variance in the types of contractual relationship between local representatives and the parent service providers who for the most part are operating in the UK. This ranged from 'strong' to 'weak' quality assurance practices by the parent provider;
- bona fide education providers in Malta already have in place many key elements of what would constitute good practice in internal quality assurance. In some cases, the structures and procedures may be informal, but they are nonetheless underpinned by the intent of ensuring a valid educational experience for students. In such cases, the Scoping Exercise served to bring to consciousness and to systematize the good practices already in place, as well as to highlight the lacunae that required particular attention;
 - the local providers that act as representatives of foreign courses and degree providers are subject to the due diligence and quality assurance procedures of the parent provider. This has frequently led to a beneficial transfer of experience and expertise that has resulted in a steady improvement and expansion of services.
- 3.1** The feedback received indicated that the internal and external quality assurance measures proposed in the Framework had to be flexible enough to cater for all these variances. These measures needed to be at par with accepted international standards to ensure the integrity and credibility of the Framework, whilst not being so cumbersome, especially for micro operations, as to overwhelm them which would be detrimental to the development and sustainability of a quality culture.
- 3.2** The need for convergence and harmonization between different quality assurance mechanisms and tools is being increasingly highlighted at EU level. Malta is responding to these developments by proposing a National Quality Assurance Framework that is customized for the realities and needs of Maltese education, and is sufficiently overarching and flexible to effectively address further, higher and adult formal education provision. This will address Malta's commitments with respect to quality assurance both for higher education in terms of the Bologna process, as well as for VET in terms of the Copenhagen Process.
- 3.3** A number of important initiatives have been taken recently in Malta and internationally to compare different quality assurance mechanisms. One can conclude that the identification of a quality assurance common conceptual core for further, higher and adult education, which is situated within the ESG and enriched by EQAVET perspectives, and that is in harmony with a whole range of quality assurance systems may already be in use by

¹ Subsidiary Legislation 327.433

Maltese providers, thus making it an achievable target for Malta.

3.4 Following the Consultative Conference of the 25th July 2014, a number of local, national and international stakeholders provided feedback with recommendations for amendments to the proposed Framework. These have been incorporated in the final text.

4.1 The Framework is underpinned by six principles that determine the remit and function of the Framework and the relationship between internal and external quality assurance to enhance learning outcomes.

a. **The Framework is based on the ESG and enriched by the EQAVET perspective.**

b. **The Framework contributes to a National Culture of Quality**, through:

- increased agency, satisfaction and numbers of service users;
- an enhanced international profile and credibility of providers in Malta, and
- the promotion of Malta as a regional provider of excellence in further and higher education.

Figure 1.1 Represents the concentric nature of the national culture of quality.

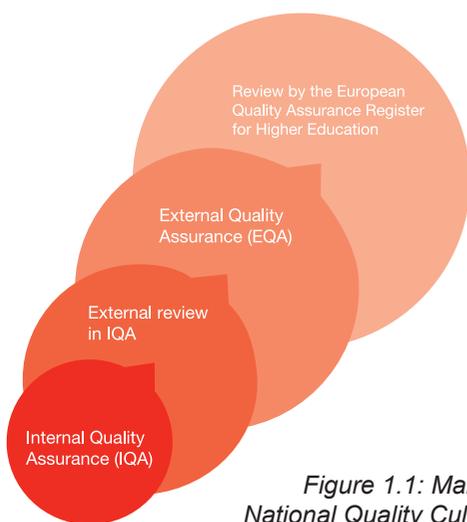


Figure 1.1: Malta's National Quality Culture

c. **The Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) is fit for Purpose.**

d. **The External Quality Assurance (EQA) is a tool for both development and accountability.** The EQA shall ensure that the internal quality management system of the provider is:

- fit for purpose according to the provider's courses and service users;
- compliant with standards and regulations and contributing to the development of a national quality culture;
- contributing to the fulfilment of the broad goals of Malta's Education Strategy 2014-2024, and

- implemented with effectiveness, comprehensiveness and sustainability.

e. **The Quality Cycle is at the heart of the Framework.**

f. **The integrity and independence of the EQA process is guaranteed.**

5.1 Table 4.1² below indicates the applicability of the various components of the Framework to the different types of entities accredited with the NCFHE.

Type of Entity	IQA	External Review of IQA	EQA
Self-accredited	x	x	x
University	x	x	x
Higher Education	x	x	x
Further and Higher Education	x	x	x
Local rep./ franchise	x	x	x
Further education	x	/	x

5.2 In parallel to the ESF Project 1.227, the NCFHE is working on the development of the accreditation and audit of e-learning based providers and programmes using international standards and tools. This development will be in harmony with the principles and standards of the Framework, and will in effect constitute part of the Second Stage of the Framework as indicated in the Foreword.

5.3 Also as part of the Second Stage of the Framework, the NCFHE shall issue clarifications on the applicability of the Framework to Further Education Centres, Tuiton Centres and VI Forms.

6.1 The Standards for internal quality assurance are:

- a. An effective Policy for quality assurance
- b. Institutional probity;
- c. Appropriate Design and approval of programmes;
- d. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment;
- e. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification;
- f. Competence of Teaching staff
- g. Appropriate Learning resources and student support;
- h. Appropriate Information management
- i. Appropriate Public information;
- j. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes;
- k. Cyclical external quality assurance.

² 'Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020. Recommendations of the National Commission for Higher Education'. NCFHE, Malta. April 2009.



2. Background and Justification

2.1 The National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) is both empowered and committed to develop and implement a national quality assurance mechanism that addresses further and higher education provision, in fulfilment of Malta's international obligations in this field.

The need for a quality assurance framework for further and higher education was first established in the Further and Higher Education Strategy 2020² for Malta, published in 2009. This Strategy outlined twelve priority areas of action and identified three areas of policy development as an immediate priority. The priority directly related to quality was the promotion of excellence in further and higher education and in research by creating a quality culture across the sector, mainly through the development of a new licensing, quality assurance and accreditation framework for further and higher education and the setting up of a Quality Assurance Agency for the sector.

The formation of the NCFHE was a direct consequence of this Strategy. The NCFHE was legislated by the revised Education Act which came into force on the 1st August 2012, and was formally launched on the 14th September of that year. However, the foundations of this Commission go back to 2005 when the Malta Qualifications Council was set up. The NCFHE in fact incorporates both the Malta Qualifications Council as well as the National Commission for Higher Education

By virtue of Subsidiary Legislation 327.433, the NCFHE had the power to make and publish guidelines and criteria for the internal quality assurance system required by providers, and to make guidelines containing the criteria and procedures to be used in accreditation and external quality assurance activities. In doing so, the NCFHE is obliged to apply the relevant European and international standards, guidelines and criteria and respect for international treaties and agreements relevant to further and higher education provision as ratified or endorsed by Malta³.

Specifically, Malta was one of the founder members of the European Higher Education Area in 1999, which led to the development of the European Standards and Guidelines for the fostering of internal and external quality assurance in higher education institutions.

Malta is also signatory to the Copenhagen Declaration of 2002 on enhanced European

cooperation in vocational education and training (VET), that led to the development of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET in 2009, and subsequently to the EQAVET system of quality assurance in VET. The Council Conclusions of November 2010 stated that by the end of 2015 Member States should establish at national level a common quality assurance framework for VET providers, which also applies to associated workplace learning compatible with the EQAVET framework. In 2013, the NCFHE led a project that adapted the EQAVET model for the Maltese context with respect to VET institutions.

With respect to adult learning, the European Commission adopted a Communication⁴ in October 2006, followed up by an Action Plan⁵ in 2007 that was endorsed in May 2008 by the Education Ministers of the countries that are signatories to the Bologna Declaration. The Action Plan identified the need for quality assurance systems for providers.

Malta is also committed to achieving the Education and Training 2020 targets that include improving the quality and efficiency of education and training by, amongst other things, developing effective quality assurance systems⁶. Indeed, the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 launched by the Ministry for Education and Employment in February 2014 includes the quality assurance of education programmes as one of the seven strategic pillars for policy development.

2.2 Overview of further, higher and adult formal education provision

In 2013 the NCFHE received European Social Funds, through Project no. 1.227 'Making Quality Visible', to develop a national internal and external quality assurance framework for further and higher education, and related procedures and tools. One of the deliverables of this Project was a Scoping Exercise with both state and non-state further, higher and adult formal education service providers, that was intended to explore the complexity of provision and the state of preparedness and practice of providers in terms of quality assurance. This Scoping Exercise took the form of one-to-one interviews from January to March 2014. 76 % of all provisional license holders⁷ at the time, as well as 63% of regular license holders which represent a good cross-section of this category, were interviewed to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible. Interviewed entities included the Project partners and the ETC.

³ Subsidiary Legislation 327.433, article 34 (2)

⁴ 'Adult learning: It Is Never Too Late to Learn', communication from the European Commission, 2006. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52006DC0614>

⁵ Action Plan on Adult learning - It is always a good time to learn, communication from the European Commission, 2007. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0558>

⁶ Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), Strategic Objective 2.

⁷ Subsidiary Legislation 327.433

The general feedback received during the Scoping visits was that these were welcomed, and that providers approved of the development of an overarching Further and Higher Quality Assurance Framework with the European Standards and Guidelines at its heart, as is explained further on in this document. With very few exceptions, all providers had a good measure of explicit or implicit internal quality assurance procedures in place, and appreciated that this would be taken into consideration once the Framework and audits were up and running, to avoid needless overlap.

The Scoping Exercise highlighted that providers could be categorised by the type of clients they serviced and by the type of courses they provided. Five categories of clients were identified:

- a. full-time 'local' students in full-time or part-time whole courses;
- b. international residential students;
- c. students attending short courses;
- d. pre- and post-16 year olds in the same entity;
- e. students with vulnerable backgrounds.

Seven categories of providers were identified by the type of courses they provide:

Of course the same entity could fall within different student and course type categories.

- a. self-accrediting institutional providers: the University of Malta, MCAST and ITS;
- b. state entities such as the ETC and the Malta Tourism Authority that develop courses, outsource their provision, and then undertake quality assurance on the course process and outcomes;
- c. local administrators of foreign accredited courses;
- d. local EFL⁸ providers for foreign clients;
- e. providers of home-grown courses;
- f. providers of distance learning courses;
- g. micro providers, typically an operation run by one or two persons and providing very few courses per year.

The Scoping Exercise also highlighted the wide spectrum of variance in the types of contractual relationship between local representatives and the parent service providers who for the most part are operating in the UK. This ranged from 'strong' to 'weak' quality assurance practices by the parent provider. A typical 'strong control' scenario meant that student selection would be made or confirmed by the parent provider, who also sent some or all of the trainers, and provided some or all of the teaching, learning and assessment resources. Scripts would be sent abroad to be marked and the results and certificate would be respectively communicated and disseminated by the parent provider. The parent provider would also send regular

moderators or evaluators to assess the learning environment and outcomes, at least once a year.

In a 'weak control' scenario, students and trainers would be selected locally, examinations would be corrected and the certificate generated locally. Quality assurance would be through spot-checks to ensure compliance with regulations and sample verification of results.

The feedback received indicated that the internal and external quality assurance measures proposed in the Framework had to be flexible enough to cater for all these variances. These measures needed to be at par with accepted international standards to ensure the integrity and credibility of the Framework, whilst not being so cumbersome, especially for micro operations, as to overwhelm them and be an actual disincentive to the development and sustainability of a quality culture.

2.3 Local current practice in Quality Assurance

The Scoping Exercise mentioned in the previous section also highlighted a pervading culture of good practice already in place in the development and implementation of quality assurance mechanisms in both state and private further and higher education provision. This serves as an excellent basis for further development.

In 2008, the University of Malta set up its Programme Validation Committee (PVC) which is a standing committee of the University Senate that replaced the Senate Sub-Committee on Approval of Courses and Regulations. The main functions of the PVC, composed of academic members of staff nominated for this purpose by the Rector, are as follows:

- to provide quality assurance mechanisms acceptable to Senate and appropriate for internal and external audit purposes;
- to ensure that academic programmes are of appropriate standard;
- to ascertain the validity of the programmes on offer;
- to ensure optimal use of available resources.

The PVC is assisted in its task by the Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit (APQRU) which also provides on-site and off-site assistance to departments and faculties, institutes and centres with regard to validation procedures.

The University of Malta has based its quality assurance procedures on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). As from January 2014, the University of Malta has started a process of periodic programme review. Programme review is an ongoing process and has as its basis the existing

⁸ The teaching of English as a Foreign Language

audit practices which take place as part of quality assurance mechanisms in place at the University. These audit practices include, for example, the study-unit feedback exercises which are held twice a year, the course experience survey, the consideration of external examiners' reports, the collation of data in relation to student progression, and ongoing and periodic consultation with stakeholders involved. However, collation of data only represents the first step in quality assurance. The real use of such an exercise is effective analysis of the data and the conclusions derived from it. Periodic Programme Review is the stage at which this data is formally considered in order to evaluate the quality and standards of programmes offered by the various academic entities. From such review, the University can design action plans which help map the way forward in favour of quality enhancement and maintenance.

All departments within the University are required to undertake Periodic Programme Review, which essentially involves an evaluation of the complete portfolio of undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes on offer. Such a review generally involves external stakeholders. This process is an important aspect of the University's quality assurance procedures, and serves to ensure that programmes are of an acceptable quality, appropriate academic standard and relevant to the needs of society.

The Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) set up its Quality Assurance Department in 2008. The ethos of the Department is that quality assurance needs to be focused on the added value to the customer, both internal and external, as identified by the Organisations' Mission Statement and Quality Policy. All Quality Assurance initiatives therefore need to be supported and consolidated by a formal and structured Quality Management System (QMS).

The scope of the QMS operated by MCAST covers two core operational areas: the design, development, approval of VET programmes and courses; and the realisation of VET and support services to Learners and Industry. The purpose of the QMS is therefore to consolidate the various key processes in order to ensure that the VET objectives are met through continuous improvement. In order to ensure the effective implementation of the QMS, the College promotes and implements the 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' Quality Cycle approach:

PLAN : Planning for improvement through:

- a. Setting of strategic and quality objectives;
- b. Design and development of full time and part time accredited vocational education programmes;
- c. Development of student support services.

DO : Realisation of :

- a. VET programmes/courses;
- b. VET related student support services;
- c. industry related services;
- d. research and Innovation initiatives.

CHECK : Measurement, monitoring and analysis of results of

- a. Strategic objectives;
- b. EQVAET indicators;
- c. internal and external Customer feedback;
- d. employee feedback;
- e. internal and external auditing;
- f. Internal Verification;
- g. management review.

ACT : Implementation of corrective, verification and preventive actions.

The various Quality Management System processes are incorporated within the College Quality Manual. The structure and content of the Quality Manual meet the requirements of the ESG Standard and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (February 2014); International standards or quality management system requirements (ISO9001 / BV Standard for Maritime Training Institutes), and the EQARF Quality indicators for assuring quality in VET.

Quality assurance has always been present at the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS) in various forms and shapes. In 2013, it participated as a partner in the EQAVET Project aimed at developing a Quality Assurance Tool to help vocational institutions implement a Quality Assurance System.

The ITS reconstituted its quality assurance structures in the second half of 2013. The major aim of the ITS Academic Quality Assurance System is to improve quality in all aspects of the Institute's operations whenever and wherever possible. The ultimate objective is to guarantee the quality of students' holistic learning experience both academically and in areas of social and personal development.

In September 2013, a formal Academic Quality Assurance Committee was set up to coordinate the implementation of a formalized quality assurance system and processes. The Committee embarked upon a robust programme aimed at consolidating all quality assurance activities within the Institute with the ultimate purpose of fostering a quality culture within the institution. Against this background a Quality Assurance Policy is being developed to guide the practice based upon the expectations of the NCFHE particularly through participation of the ITS in ESF Project 1.227 'Making Quality Visible'.

The ITS Quality Assurance System places the onus of its implementation upon the entire Institute.

It is mainly based on self-reviews operating in all institutional areas at different levels on a continuous cyclic basis, focused on continuous self-improvement and accountability to stakeholders.

The initial steps towards establishing this system have already been taken. A draft Quality Assurance Manual has been published and is at present under review by the ITS staff. Information and training seminars are being held for consultation purposes.

The ITS Programme/Module validation system is being strengthened. As ITS was already having its courses validated by the Malta Qualifications Council for a number of years, a formal system was already in place. This has now been revised and up-dated especially in view of the fact that the Institute will be offering MQF Level 6 courses in the future.

Other basic documentation has also been reinforced: rules & regulations, examination policies, regulations and procedures. A Code of Ethics has also been drawn up.

The Directorate for Lifelong Learning (DLLL) was established in 2009 within the Ministry for Education and Employment. The DLLL is responsible for the design and implementation of Malta's Lifelong Learning Strategy and is guided by a vision that quality lifelong learning that empowers citizens through more personalised and innovative approaches to adult education.

The DLLL has the mission to increase participation in adult learning and to address the imbalances in participation to achieve a more equitable state of affairs. It is responsible for the selection, recruitment and placement of adult educators within its different centres, namely the seven Evening Classes Centres, the Lifelong Learning Centre in Msida and courses offered at community level. The Directorate recruits adult educators who are specialised in various fields including digital competence, family learning, languages, maths, science and technology, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; social health and civic competences; vocational and educational training. It collaborates with the NCHFE to ensure that its courses are accredited according to the Malta Qualification Framework.

The DLLL is developing quality assurance and evaluation measures aimed at improving the quality and efficiency of over 200 adult learning courses. The DLLL engaged a quality assurance adult courses coordinator, who together with the Directorate's senior management, has the responsibility of ensuring that a number of processes and procedures are in place.

These include: Ensuring that learning outcomes are developed with and distributed to all educators and then processed by area/subject coordinators.

1. Planning two observations per year to be conducted by the area coordinators using standardised templates and level descriptors. A second visit may then be conducted by the Education Officer for Lifelong Learning.
2. Gathering feedback from learners through a standardised on-line questionnaire distributed at end of course.
3. signing standardised assessment criteria for each course.

Work is currently in progress to ensure that effective measures are in place for the new academic year 2014/2015.

The Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) is Malta's public employment agency and a major provider of VET courses. To enhance the quality of its training services, the Corporation set up a Training Programme Design and Quality Assurance Unit in 2011. This Unit was set up specifically to develop and update training programmes, as well as provide and implement a quality assurance framework for training programme delivery. The Unit has adopted and implemented quality standards that range from the qualifications required by trainers to deliver training programmes, to classroom facilities, learner's course notes, training material and delivery, assessment methodology, certification and code of conduct. Since this Unit is also responsible for obtaining MQF/EQF level ratings for training programmes, the QA Unit also performs checks on recruited trainers or Contractors to ensure that the latter are abiding by the course layouts, which are aligned with the applications submitted for the accreditation process. This Unit also assesses the feedback received from trainers or Contractors and trainees at the end of each course module. Such feedback assists the Unit in designing new courses or updating of current courses.

The private sector has also actively pursued good quality assurance practices. One of the conclusions of the Scoping Exercise was that bona fide private sector education providers in Malta already have in place many key elements of what would constitute good practice in internal quality assurance. In some cases the structures and procedures may be informal, but they are nonetheless underpinned by the intent of ensuring a fair deal and a valid educational experience for students. In these cases, the Scoping Exercise served to bring to consciousness and to systematize the good practice already in place, as well as to highlight the shortcomings that required particular attention.

Many local providers act as representatives of course and degree providers that are established overseas, and are subject to the due diligence and quality assurance procedures of the parent provider.

This has many times led to a beneficial transfer of experience and expertise that has led to a steady improvement and expansion of services. Here the Scoping Exercise highlighted both the good practices in place, as well as the role that the local provider always has, in so far as Maltese jurisdiction is concerned, to be the primary guarantor of quality of the education experience of its students.

2.4 Need for a National QA Framework

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)⁹ were originally developed by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in cooperation with the European Students' Union, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education and the European University Association, and are intended to ensure quality in higher education provision. They came about as a result of an invitation by the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states in September 2003 to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality as well as ensuring an adequate peer review system. They were accepted by the Council of the Ministers in 2005 and revised in 2009.

During the Scoping Exercise mentioned earlier all further education providers agreed that the ethos and scope of the ESG could function as the basis for a national quality assurance framework that catered not only for higher but also for further and lifelong educational provision, for both state and private sectors. Indeed Subsidiary Legislation 327.433, 'Further and Higher Education (Licensing, Accreditation and Quality Assurance) Regulations' is situated within the discourse of the ESG: it defines quality assurance in terms of complementary internal and external processes whilst placing the responsibility for the former on the provider. It is worth noting that since the passing of this Legal Notice, the NCFHE has been requesting both further and higher education providers in Malta to develop their internal quality assurance system on the basis of the ESG. The Scoping Exercise thus indicated that both state and private sector further and higher education providers were ready, willing and able to take on board, and make best use of, a more systematic quality assurance mechanism in the form of a comprehensive national framework.

At the same time, providers expressed the need for a QA framework that was not only process but also outcome oriented, and had a greater sensitivity to stakeholder (including employer) involvement and employability issues than the 2009 version of the ESG. The Legal Notice itself is not circumscribed by these Guidelines, and goes beyond them in stipulating measures to ensure due process in, for example, accreditation and effective student safeguards.

All this is in line with the direction of the European Council Conclusions of May 2014 on Quality Assurance Supporting Education and Training. These have urged the European Commission to: "work (...) towards closer coordination and improvement of EQAVET and European tools for quality assurance in higher education, notably by incorporating a learning outcomes approach and with the support of transparency instruments such as the EQF, Europass and European credit systems"(p.5)¹⁰. Indeed in April 2014 the Commission concluded a wide-ranging stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications¹¹ that included the following questions:

- a. Is it possible to identify some common basic principles and guidelines of quality assurance valid across sectors and applicable to all qualifications?
- b. Should there be a core of common European quality assurance principles for the provision of learning opportunities in all sectors of education and training?¹²

It is worth noting that the ESG are currently being revised and will be addressing some of the issues raised by Maltese providers. The European Commission¹³ considers that the ESG have helped the convergence of quality assurance in higher education across countries, but due to their generic nature they tend to be understood and applied unevenly. Their revision is intended to keep the strengths of the 2009 version of the ESG, such as the integrated concept and understanding of QA, and its broad applicability and ownership, whilst addressing the weaknesses that have been highlighted through experience. These include elements of vagueness, redundancies and inconsistencies. Also, the Council Conclusions of May 2014 recommended the broadening of the scope of the ESG to include issues such as access to higher education, assessment of learning outcomes, retention of students, completion of studies and employability of graduates, and promoting cooperation on quality assurance with relevant education and training sectors.

Malta is responding to all these developments by proposing a National Quality Assurance Framework that is customized for the realities and needs of Maltese education, and is sufficiently overarching and flexible to effectively address further, higher and adult formal education provision. This will address Malta's commitments with respect to quality assurance both for higher education in terms of the Bologna process, as well as for VET, in terms of the Copenhagen Process.

⁹ 2009 version available at: http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG_3edition-2.pdf

¹⁰ Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/142694.pdf

¹¹ 'Stakeholder Consultation on the European Area of Skills and Qualifications. Background Document' European Commission March 2014

¹² Ibid. p. 20

¹³ Ibid. p. 11

The purpose of the Framework is thus to:

- promote trust and confidence in Malta's qualifications system on a national, European and global scale;
- support sound and robust qualifications based on a learning outcomes approach;
- establish a forum for sharing of expertise, experience and quality control of qualifications at national level, and
- serve as a point of reference and a referencing device.

2.5 Comparing different QA models

A number of important initiatives have been taken recently to compare different quality assurance mechanisms. In March 2014, the EQAVET Network published on its website a comparative analysis of the EQAVET Framework, the ISO 9001 Standard and the EFQM Excellence Model. This analysis concluded that although these three models developed historically from completely different origins and, consequently, differ substantially in terms of focus and tools used, they do share important common elements. All three models are concerned with the same issues and are built on the Shewhart/Deming Cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act) to achieve continual improvement.

In 2014, MCAST completed an exercise that cross references the support and operational processes of its customised Quality Management System (QMS) with the requirements of three specific external standards/recommendations, namely the ESG, the EQAVET model (as adapted for the Maltese context¹⁴) and the Bureau Veritas Standard for Quality Management Systems of Maritime Training Institutes.

It can be concluded from this cross-referencing exercise that the structure of the MCAST QMS is compatible with and fulfils the requirements of these three systems. In fact, it has been possible for the College to design the QMS in a modular structure that will allow for the adaptation to future changes in both internal and external stakeholder requirements.

The NCFHE also conducted an internal exercise in 2014 that compared the ESG¹⁵ with the EQAVET Malta model including the Quality Indicators, the Framework Factors and the six Key Principles on which to base a QA system. It concluded that at a conceptual level all the Factors and Principles and 65% of the Indicators were reflected in the ESG. Both systems allow for both institutional-level and programme-level quality assurance. The conceptual differences are that the ESG are more explicit in their process orientation, in the relationship between internal and external quality

assurance functions, and in placing the primary responsibility of quality assurance on the provider. On the other hand the EQAVET model is more explicitly oriented towards employability and employment, with a clearer reference to employers' involvement. The Shewhart/Deming Quality Cycle is an explicit component of the EQAVET model, whereas it is subsumed within the ESG and certainly does not act in contradiction to it. These differences are likely to be reduced with the revised version of the ESG.

Kelly (2010)¹⁶ compared the ESG and the EQAVET models. She concluded that both ESG and EQAVET outline the importance of developing a culture of quality. Both seek to promote greater consistency of quality policies (EQAVET) and standards (ESG) across their sub-sectors thereby increasing mutual trust among Member States and institutions which will greatly facilitate the recognition of qualifications. They both make reference to the need for internal and external evaluation mechanisms and processes. There are a number of key stages that can be found in both ESG and EQAVET that are essential for embedding a culture of quality across the entire education and training sector and provide a basis for future cooperation among the further, higher and adult education providers. These are:

- The development and ownership of the QA system;
- Self-assessment or internal evaluation;
- External assessment or evaluation;
- Review and enhancement.

Neither the ESG nor EQAVET prescribe how quality assurance should be implemented. Both set out a framework reference for providers within their respective sub-sectors that highlight what should be done but not how it should be done. However, there are significant differences in the detail between ESG and EQAVET. In general ESG is more explicit and sets out specific standards and accompanying guidelines for internal and external quality assurance of higher education institutions and of the agencies.

Finally, two important initiatives by the European Commission looked at the quality assurance requirements for adult education. In 2009, the Commission initiated a three-year Thematic Network of 14 national agencies for lifelong learning, in order to increase the impact of innovative projects in VET and adult education. The Network was entitled QALLL which stands for "Quality Assurance in LifeLong Learning with a Focus on Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education".

The project aimed to improve the quality and efficiency of education and training by highlighting

¹⁴ 'Implementation of Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (VET) Institutions. A Manual for VET Providers'. NCFHE, Malta. 2013.

¹⁵ 2009 version

¹⁶ Barbara Kelly 'Towards a quality assured and integrated lifelong learning implementation strategy' in Belgian EU Presidency Conference 'Quality Assurance and transparency as interface between Vocational Education and Training, Schools and Higher Education to enhance mobility and to support easier pathways to Lifelong Learning'. December 2010, Brugge.

good practice and developing recommendations. One of its ten key recommendations was the adoption of the EQAVET quality cycle to ensure constant improvement in the provision of adult education.

The 2013 report 'Developing the adult learning Sector - Quality in the Adult Learning Sector' commissioned by the European Commission concluded that the EQAVET and ESG quality reference frameworks are applicable to the situation of the adult learning sector, acknowledging that the adult learning sector is less uniform in terms of objectives, organisation, target groups, and societal results (especially for the nonformal part of adult learning). Most cases studied in the report were based on the same philosophy (the quality cycle), and similar descriptors were in place.

It can be concluded that the identification of a quality assurance common conceptual core for further, higher and adult education, which is situated within the ESG and enriched by EQAVET perspectives, and that is in harmony with a whole range of quality assurance systems that may already be used by Maltese providers, is an achievable target for Malta.

2.6 Feedback from stakeholders and critical friends

The Consultative Conference of the 25th July 2014 was the first event in a consultative period up to the end of September 2014. Feedback was received from:

- Maltese stakeholders, including further and higher service providers
- ENQA - the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- CEDEFOP – the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
- AQA - the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (focusing on higher education)
- OAQ - the Swiss Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- QAA – the UK Quality Assurance Agency (which focuses on higher education but also covers Further Education provided overseas)

- RAQAPE - the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (which includes VET provision)

The feedback endorsed the conceptual basis of the Framework, its principles and IQA and EQA Standards and procedures. Furthermore recommendations were made with respect to:

- the applicability of the Framework with respect to Further Education Centres, English Language Schools and VI Forms;
- the need to include clarifications in certain standards to make explicit what was not sufficiently clear and was explained during the Consultative Conference;
- restrict student participation in the EQA review panel to actual students from other entities, not ex-students from the entity hosting the EQA;
- the need to consider the inclusion of employers in the EQA review panel especially for vocationally-oriented providers;
- the need to include international reviewers in the EQA panel were appropriate and applicable;
- the need to provide training and preparation for local prospective EQA reviewers;
- the need to include selection criteria for all EQA panel members, not just students;
- EQA data sources: if the hosting entity's IQA report is older than two years or is not according to parameters established by the NCFHE, a self-assessment report would be required;
- the full EQA report that is published: this needs to include both findings (both good practice and what needs to be improved) and recommendations.

Additionally, the external peer experts that formed part of the review panels for the EQA of the University of Malta, MCAST and ITS also gave their feedback on the Framework and the EQA Manual of Procedures.

These recommendations were integrated into the final version of the IQA and EQA standards in this publication, and in the Manual of Procedures.



3. Principles of the Framework

Malta's National Quality Assurance Framework for Further, Higher and Adult Formal Education, which hereinafter will be referred to as the Framework is underpinned by six principles that determine the remit and function of the Framework, and the relationship between internal and external quality assurance to enhance learning outcomes.

3.1 A Framework based on the ESG and enriched by the EQAVET perspective

The Framework shall be based on the Standards of the ESG and adapted to the Maltese context, taking into consideration Subsidiary Legislation 327.433. The IQA standards of the Framework shall be enriched by EQAVET components that relate more directly to outcomes and employability.

3.2 A Framework that contributes to a National Culture of Quality

The Framework shall contribute to a national quality culture, by supporting providers to develop and improve their internal quality management systems which are regulated, monitored and supported by external quality audits. The Framework thereby contributes to:

- increased agency, satisfaction and numbers of service users;
- an enhanced international profile and credibility of providers in Malta, and
- the promotion of Malta as a regional provider of excellence in further and higher education.



Figure 3.1: Malta's National Quality Culture

Figure 3.1 represents the concentric nature of the national culture of quality. At its core is the internal quality assurance process conducted by the provider. This may be augmented by an external review that is sought by the provider. The third cycle in the quality culture is the external quality audit conducted by the NCFHE, as explained below. Finally, the NCFHE will itself be peer reviewed by other quality assurance agencies within the context of the due diligence process of the European Quality Assurance Register.

3.3 Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) that is Fit for Purpose

Providers shall have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its quality assurance. Each IQA needs to be designed to be fit for purpose according to the provider's courses and service users. The Framework shall provide the necessary guidelines for the development of these IQAs whilst allowing for established quality management systems adopted by providers that are in harmony with the Framework.

3.4 External Quality Assurance (EQA) that is a tool for both Development and Accountability

The EQA process shall have both a developmental and an accountability perspective. It shall be developmental by giving providers access to independent data and recommendations to promote excellence. It shall also ensure accountability to stakeholders, including learners and employers, and the fulfilment of national goals in further, higher and adult formal education. The EQA shall ensure that the internal quality management system of the provider is:

- fit for purpose according to the provider's courses and service users;
- compliant with standards and regulations while contributing to the development of a national quality culture;
- contributing to the fulfilment of the broad goals of Malta's Education Strategy 2014-2024;
- implemented with effectiveness, comprehensiveness and sustainability.

3.5 The Quality Cycle at the Heart of the Framework



Diagram 3.2:
The Quality Cycle

The learning and improvement dynamic of the Framework shall be the Quality Cycle, which is itself learning outcomes-based. For the purposes of this Framework the EQAVET version shall be adopted as per Diagram 3.2, but this can be taken to represent the different equivalent versions of the quality cycle embedded in other quality management systems.

The Quality Cycle informs both the learning process of the IQA as well as the developmental perspective of the EQA and its interaction with the IQA. The developmental relationship between the IQA and the EQA that is driven by the Quality Cycle is illustrated by Diagram 2.3. It is the provider's IQA that is the primary driver for enhanced quality and output, assisted by the EQA process.

3.6 Integrity and Independence of the EQA Process

The NCFHE shall act, and be seen to act, with integrity and independence in its EQA function, by:

- having autonomous responsibility for its operations;
- ensuring that the conclusions and recommendations made in its EQA reports and the outcomes thereof shall not be influenced by any third parties;
- ensuring that the definition and operation of its procedures and methods, and the nomination of its external experts shall not be influenced by any third parties;
- operating a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts; and
- ensuring that while relevant stakeholders, particularly students and teaching staff, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcome of any quality audit or accreditation decision remains its responsibility.



Diagram 3.3:
Relationship between IQA and EQA



4. Applicability of the Framework

Table 4.1 below indicates the applicability of the various components of the Framework to the different types of entities accredited with the NCFHE.

Type of Entity	IQA	External Review of IQA	EQA
Self-accredited	x	x	x
University	x	x	x
Higher Education	x	x	x
Further and Higher Education	x	x	x
Local rep./ franchise	x	x	x
Further education	x	/	x

Table 4.1: Applicability of the Framework

As illustrated in Table 4.1, all entities are required to have an IQA mechanism in place for all accredited courses and programmes, and to undertake EQAs.

Self-accrediting institutions, universities, higher education institutions and local providers acting as representatives of foreign educational institutions are additionally required to have an external review component in their IQA. This can take the form of external examiners, moderators or validators, and/or ad hoc reviews, audits or inspections by third parties requested by the provider to undertake this service. Such external reviews do not replace the EQA process. However the EQA will take the external review process and outcomes into

account. Entities that are licensed as further and higher education institutions require an external review only of their higher education component. EQAs of entities that are required to undertake an external review of their IQA shall expect to see evidence of such a review at least once during the EQA five-year cycle.

Entities licensed as further education institutions or centres or tuition centres are not required to undertake external review of their IQAs.

The EQA shall eventually encompass both institutional and programme levels of audit. Indeed, in line with Regulation 37 (b) of Subsidiary Legislation 327.433, all courses that are already accredited by the NCFHE or will be accredited in the future and are equivalent to the three cycles of qualification in the Bologna Process are subject to an EQA after the first full cycle of provision, i.e. after the first group of students graduate. The courses in question are:

- full MQF Level 6 degrees
- all MQF Level 7 courses
- all MQF Level 8 provision

However the first full EQA cycle shall focus on the institutional level so as to implement the developmental orientation of the EQA.

In parallel to the ESF Project 1.227, the NCFHE is working on the development of the accreditation and audit of e-learning based providers and programmes using international standards and tools. This development will be in harmony with the principles and standards of the Framework, and will in effect constitute part of the Second Stage of the Framework as indicated in the Foreword.

Also as part of the Second Stage of the Framework, the NCFHE shall issue clarifications on the applicability of the Framework to Further Education Centres, Tuition Centres and VI Forms.



5. The IQA Standards

As indicated in the first Principle of Section 3 earlier in this document, the Standards of this Framework are based on the 2014 proposed version of the ESG, and are adapted to take into account the VET reality, the local context and Subsidiary Legislation 327.433. The Standards in this Framework do not prescribe how the quality assurance processes are implemented. They are intended to provide guidance, covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in further, higher and adult formal education. These Standards should be considered in a broader context that also includes the Malta Qualifications Framework, the use of ECTS¹⁷ and ECVET¹⁸ learning credits as indicated in the Malta Referencing Report of 2012¹⁹ and subsequent editions, and the use of diploma and certificate supplements that also contribute to promoting the transparency and mutual trust in Maltese further and higher educational provision.

The focus of these Standards is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching, including the learning environment and where applicable, relevant links to research and innovation. In addition entities have policies and processes to ensure and improve the quality of their other activities such as governance, and research where applicable. The Standards apply to further, higher and adult formal provision²⁰ in Malta regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery, including transnational and cross-border provision. In this document the term “programme” refers to the full range of provision, from short courses up to full programmes as indicated by the Maltese Referencing Report of 2012 and any subsequent editions.

These Standards are fully compatible with Subsidiary Legislation 327.433. No interpretation of these Standards that is not in line with the Legal Notice is permissible. They shall be reviewed in 2017.

5.1 Standards for internal quality assurance Policy for quality assurance

Entities shall have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders shall develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders. Such a policy should include:

- a. the organisation of the quality assurance system;
- b. the responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties, institutes and/or other organisational units as well as those of institutional leadership,

- c. individual staff members and students with respect to quality assurance;
- c. reference to the relationship between research and learning & teaching, where applicable;
- d. procedures for ensuring academic integrity and freedom, where applicable;
- e. procedures for ensuring against academic fraud;
- f. procedures for ensuring against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff;
- g. the involvement of external stakeholders in quality assurance;
- h. procedures for the quality assurance of any elements of an entity’s activities that are subcontracted to or carried out by other parties;
- i. in the case of local representatives or franchises of foreign providers, explicit reference to the quality assurance procedures of the parent provider and the role of the local representative or franchise in this.

5.2 Institutional probity

Entities shall ensure that they have appropriate measures and procedures in place to ensure financial probity. Universities, self-accrediting institutions and other entities with a turnover of more than €50,000 per annum shall have yearly audited accounts and regular budget plans²¹. Other accredited entities shall have yearly financial statements and regular budget plans. Entities shall ensure that the members of the body corporate, the legal representative and the persons occupying a headship position are fit and proper persons to deliver further and/or higher education programmes.

5.3 Design and approval of programmes

Self-accrediting entities shall have processes for the design and approval of their programmes that have the following characteristics:

- a. they define the expected student workload in terms of ECTS or ECVET learning credits;
- b. they indicate the target audience and the minimum eligibility and selection criteria, where applicable;
- c. they are learning outcome-based, distinguishing between knowledge, skills and competences;
- d. they indicate appropriate learning dynamics and a measure of tutor-learner interaction as is appropriate for the course level and content;

¹⁷ European Credit Transfer System

¹⁸ European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training

¹⁹ ‘Referencing of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF/EHEA)’. Malta Qualifications Council, Ministry of Education and Employment, Malta, 2012.

²⁰ As indicated in Chapter 4 the NCFHE shall issue clarifications in a second stage on the applicability of the Framework to English Language Schools, Further Education Centres and VI Forms.

- e. they indicate appropriate resources and forms of assessment;
- f. they indicate the minimum requirements in terms of qualifications and competences for teaching staff;
- g. they are in line with the MQF and the Malta Referencing Report 2012 and subsequent updates;
- h. the process of the identification of training/ programme needs involves the participation of external stakeholders who are likely to benefit from the outcomes of such provision;
- i. programmes that are employment-oriented involve stakeholders from the world of work in their design and review;
- j. they involve students in their design and review;
- k. they are designed so that they enable smooth student progression;
- l. they are subject to a formal institutional approval process.

Other entities accredited by the NCFHE shall follow the programme accreditation procedure of the NCFHE, which shall be in line with this Standard. The current procedure is available at <http://www.ncfhe.org.mt/educational-institutions/>.

5.4 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Entities shall 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. The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching shall:

- a. respect and attend to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths;
- b. consider and use different modes of delivery, where appropriate;
- c. flexibly use a variety of pedagogical methods;
- d. regularly evaluate and adjust the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods;
- e. encourage a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and
- f. support from the teacher/lecturer;
- g. promote mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship.

Quality assurance processes for assessment shall take into account the following:

- a. Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in

- developing their own skills in this field;
- b. The criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance;
- c. The achieved learning outcomes are analysed in relation to the intended outcomes. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process;
- d. Where possible and applicable, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner;
- e. The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances;
- f. Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures;
- g. A formal procedure for student complaints and appeals is in place.

5.5 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Entities shall consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification. In particular:

- a. Admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner;
- b. induction to the institution and the programme is provided;
- c. both processes and tools are in place to collect, monitor and manage information on student progression;
- d. while accredited entities retain the right to determine their own selection criteria, they have mechanisms in place to take into consideration relevant qualifications that are accredited or recognised by the NCFHE, and relevant periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- e. on successful course completion, students receive documentation explaining the context, MQF level, amount of learning credit, content and status of the qualification gained, in line with NCFHE regulations. By 2017, locally accredited full qualifications at both further and higher education levels shall reference achieved learning outcomes.

5.6 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Entities shall assure the competence of their teaching staff. They shall apply clear, fair and transparent processes for the recruitment, conditions of employment and professional

development of such staff. Entities shall promote innovation in teaching methods, and continuous professional development. Higher education institutions shall encourage scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research, where applicable. In the case of part-time teaching staff providing limited and ad hoc services, entities shall ensure that such staff is constantly au courant with developments in their fields and with the methodological requirements of their programmes.

5.7 Learning resources and student support

Entities shall have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities. They should ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources are provided to assist student learning commensurate to the type and level of course/s. These resources may vary from physical or virtual libraries, learning equipment, study facilities and IT infrastructure to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors and/or other advisers.

The needs of a diverse student population (such as mature, part-time, employed and international students as well as students with disabilities), and the shift towards student-centred learning should be taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support.

All resources and services should be fit for purpose and accessible, and students should be informed about the services available to them. In delivering support services the role of support and administrative staff is crucial and therefore they need to be qualified and have opportunities to develop their competences.

5.8 Information management

Entities shall ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

This information shall include:

- a. Profile of the student population, including prevalence of vulnerable groups;
- b. Course participation, retention and success rates;
- c. Students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- d. Employment rates and career paths.

Various methods of collecting information may be used. Sources of such information may include the NCFHE yearly statistics for further and higher education, which will be reformulated to provide this service. Students and staff should be involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.

5.9 Public information

Entities shall publish information about their activities, including courses/programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

The information should include:

- a. the selection criteria for the courses/programmes;
- b. their intended learning outcomes;
- c. the qualifications they award, including information on the EQF/MQF level and ECTS/ECVET learning credits;
- d. the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used;
- e. the pass rates, and
- f. the further learning opportunities available to their students.

The information available shall be sufficient for prospective applicants to be able to make an informed choice in terms of the knowledge, skills and competences they are likely to acquire on successful completion of the programme.

5.10 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

Entities shall implement the Quality Cycle by monitoring and periodically reviewing their programmes in terms of their IQA policy and standards. The objectives of this exercise shall be i) to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them; ii) to review the content of the programme in the light of latest research/practice in the sector to ensure that the programme is up to date; and iii) to respond to the changing needs of students and society.

Such reviews shall include input from students and, where applicable, input from EQA reports. They shall also include other stakeholders that are benefiting from the outcomes of the programme; in the case of employment-oriented programmes this includes stakeholders from the world of work. These reviews shall lead to continuous improvement of the programmes. Any action planned or taken as a result shall be communicated to all those concerned.

5.11 Cyclical external quality assurance

Entities should undergo external quality assurance by, or with the approval of, the NCFHE on a cyclical basis according to NCFHE guidelines, once every five years.



6. Standards for Quality Audits

6.1 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

The institutional EQAs in the Maltese system are intended to ensure whether the internal quality management system of the provider is:

- a. fit for purpose according to the provider's courses and service users;
- b. compliant with standards and regulations and contributing to the development of a national quality culture;
- c. contributing to the fulfilment of the broad goals of Malta's Education Strategy 2014-2024, and
- d. implemented with effectiveness, comprehensiveness and sustainability.

In practice, this means that it is not enough that the entity has IQA systems on paper or simply statutorily set up. The EQA needs to check that these systems are fit for purpose, are in fact functioning and effective, and are sustainable.

The EQA shall address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance in this sense, with respect to the first 10 IQA Standards described in Part 5 of this Framework.

6.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

The EQA shall be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set according to specific context of the provider, whilst taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders shall be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

6.3 Implementing processes

EQA processes shall be reliable, useful, pre-defined, fit for purpose, implemented consistently and published. They include

- e. self-assessment or equivalent;
- f. an external assessment that includes a site visit;
- g. a report resulting from the external assessment;
- h. a consistent follow-up.

6.1 Peer-review experts

The EQA shall have a professional system of peer review at its core, carried out by groups of experts selected or approved by the NCFHE and that include student members.

6.2 Criteria for formal outcomes

Any outcomes as the result of external quality assurance shall be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently according to the different category of providers.

6.3 Reporting

The full EQA reports shall be published, clear and accessible to the staff of the institution, external partners and other interested individuals. If the NCFHE takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision shall be published alongside the report.

6.4 Complaints and appeals

Complaints and appeals processes shall be clearly defined as part of the design of the EQA processes and communicated to the entities in the EQA Manual of Procedures.

The detailed parameters for the undertaking of EQAs are given in the EQA Manual of Procedures which is a companion publication to this Framework.