



**AGJENCIA E SIGURIMIT TË CILËSISË NË
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FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

**"THE PROVISION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE EXPERTISE TO SUPPORT THE
CREATION OF EXTERNAL QUALITY REVIEW MATERIALS, PEER REVIEWER
TRAINING AND EXTERNAL REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS
IN ALBANIA"**

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Welcome and introductions

This method was designed following the Albanian Government Initiative for the Institutional Review of Albanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with International Expertise, pursuant to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education and Sport of Albania and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK in December 2014 and The Overall Project Contract between QAA and the Ministry of Education and Sport.

The overall aim of Institutional Review was to assess the extent to which each HEI reached the State Quality Standards, with reference to the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) on which the accreditation decision is based. The resulting reports informed not only the HEI but also the Albanian government, the public and students of how each HEI met the standards. The purpose of the review process was also to encourage HEIs to work towards enhancement, that is systematically improving the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported.

The institutional reviews were conducted according to a Handbook written jointly by APAAL¹ and QAA, and which took the ESG into consideration².

The programme of reviews enabled APAAL and QAA to further its successful partnership and learn of each other's work and quality assurance cultures.

The Role of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

QAA expertise and experts supported the external quality assessment of the HEIs in Albania. QAA provided APAAL with support in the development of the review method and in the creation of the external quality review documents, including the Handbook and its Annexes.

QAA, with the support of APAAL, trained the peer reviewers from both the UK and Albania who were involved in conducting the reviews. The training enabled QAA reviewers to become familiar with higher education in Albania and the State Quality Standards, and it enable Albanian reviewers to learn of the review method and practice.

The Institutional Reviews were managed by APAAL and in line with the State Quality Standards for Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education in Albania. QAA provided and trained UK reviewers for the Albanian-UK review teams. Each review team was led by a QAA lead reviewer. Following the reviews, QAA provided support to ensure that the review report recommendations were clear and well supported with evidence from the review processes, and prepared a summary of the review reports in English.

APAAL scheduled the review activities and the visits, established and maintained communications with the HEIs being reviewed, coordinated the reviews, provided administrative and logistical support, including note takers and translators, conducted staff and student surveys in each HEI, gathered general institutional data from each HEI, supported the desk-based evaluation stage of reviews through providing institutional data, sent draft reports to HEIs, and prepared the final report for the Accreditation Council. It has also published each report in Albanian and English.

¹ Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education in Albania, today reorganized as ASCAL

²<http://ascal.al/media/documents/publikime/manuali%20vleresimit%20institucional%20ial%202016.pdf>

Summary of the review method

Institutional Review was a four-stage process, in line with international good practice, consisting of a self-evaluation, a desk-based analysis, a review visit and a review report.

The process started with the HEI's own self-evaluation, and the resulting Self-Evaluation Documents which are submitted to APAAL. APAAL then combined the HEI's Self-Evaluation Documents with other information to form the Self-Evaluation Folder. This other information included supporting evidence collated from the APAAL database and staff and student questionnaire surveys administered, collated and summarised by APAAL. A team of peer reviewers external to the HEI and composed of higher education experts appointed by APAAL and QAA carried out a desk-based analysis of the Self-Evaluation Folder. Reviewers also requested additional information during the review visits where necessary.

Each HEI was visited by a review team. During this stage, the reviewers met the HEI's representatives of staff, students and other stakeholders. The purpose of the visit was to scrutinise and verify data, facts and information on the different areas identified by the reviewers during their desk-based analysis. This enabled them to make findings and come to six judgements, one for each of the five Evaluation Areas, and an overall judgement on the extent to which the HEI meets the standards. These were detailed in the review report, along with the reasons for these judgements.

The review process was based on the experience of APAAL and QAA and the principles set out in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2015 (ESG) which assume that the primary responsibility for the quality of higher education provision rests with the HEIs themselves. The Guidelines also recommend the whole review process should be carried out with full respect for the diversity of the higher education system, institutions and students, taking into account their needs and expectations, as well as aiming to enhance and develop the quality culture.

This evaluation report is based on a number of evaluation activities:

- Questionnaires sent to reviewers, lead reviewers and higher education institutions
- A focus group webinar held with lead reviewers.
- A meeting held between APAAL and QAA in London on 12 January 2018.

HEIs involved in the process

This process involved all 35 HEIs in Albania, both public and private. 19 HEIs were universities (12 public and 7 private), 12 higher education institutions/ university colleges (private), 3 academies (1 public and 2 private) and 1 private professional college.

All public institutions (13) underwent an institutional review for the first time in their history. 10 out of 22 private HEIs entered voluntarily in the process, including those that already had institutional accreditation.

Pre-Visit activities

As provided in the overall contract between MoES and QAA and the individual contracts between QAA and APAAL, the preparation phase (07.03.2016-08.07.2016) consisted of two type of activities:

Activity 1: Development of the Review methodology and finalization of the Handbook

Activity 2: Selection and Training of the Reviewers.

Preparation and administration of the process: the Handbook

The Handbook 2016-2017 for “The Institutional Review of Higher Education Institutions in Albania” was thoroughly discussed and elaborated between the two agencies (QAA and APAAL). The process started with the kick-off meeting held on 21-22st March 2016, at the QAA-UK premises in Gloucester, UK and consequently completed through online and AMS (APAAL Management System) communication. The Handbook has been finalised in the English version on 17th May 2016, further translated by APAAL in Albanian and published on 30th May 2016, both in English and Albanian.

The Handbook was launched in a formal meeting on 20.05.2016 with representatives from the 35 HEIs involved and a number of meetings with Rectors and Institutional Coordinators between 21st-30th May 2016.

Part of this process was the reorganisation and rebalancing of the National Standards for Institutional Reviews and Accreditation in Albania into 5 Review Areas, which helped understanding and use of those in the context of the Review process with QAA. QAA gave a substantial assistance in this process, which helped the process itself, and enabled the Institutions and the accreditation body (Accreditation Board) to have a better understanding of how to use the standards, for a better and fairer accreditation decision.

In the framework of the first activity, APAAL in collaboration with QAA, prepared two set of review supporting documents: the staff and the student questionnaires. These documents aimed to draw the feedback and opinion from the academic staff and students of the institutions involved in the review process. Separate questionnaires were prepared for the academic and students’ feedback, both in English and Albanian. The questionnaires were used for the review process of the 35 HEIs under review and were elaborated by APAAL staff. The questionnaires’ outcomes, were taken into consideration by the Review Teams for the preparations of the Review Report. The results have been communicated to all Institutions, after the Review completion and Accreditation decision.

Training of Reviewers

Selection and training of the reviewers engaged in the Institutional Review of Albanian HEI-s was carried out during April - June 2016.

Experienced Reviewers from QAA and APAAL were engaged in the process. The selection and appointment of the reviewers from both agencies, followed the specific criteria, as set in Annex 7 of the Handbook. The lists of the selected experts, as approved by the respective agencies, included a total of 34 experts, 22 from QAA and 12 from APAAL.

QAA and APAAL prepared and developed a set of documents and training materials for the experts. The training of the QAA experts was held on 7-8 June 2016, in Gloucester, UK, with the participation of 3 representatives from APAAL. The QAA experts were informed about the Albanian HE system, the profile of HEI-s to undergo the Institutional Review, the Review Methodology and other technical and practical issues of the process. For a better and clear understanding and use in the Albanian HE context, specific aspects of the methodology provided in the Handbook, such as Annex 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10, were further elaborated and discussed.

The training of the Albanian experts was organised in two steps: a preliminary workshop organised by APAAL on 23rd June and a 2-days training on 29-30th June, with the representatives of 2 QAA experts. During this training session, the Albanian experts were informed by the UK colleagues about the review methodology, the techniques of enquiring and communication, the role of the team leader and team work in the context of a quality review, as well as how to reach an area or overall judgment, based on the review outcome and findings.

ASCAL Management Systems (AMS, communications)

The evaluation process was managed through ASCAL Management System (AMS). AMS is an internal platform/ system used for the management of the procedures, institutional data and intercommunication with HEIs, reviewers and Accreditation Council, for the quality review and accreditation of HEIs.

This platform, designed, adapted and used in full for this process, and for the first time in English, resulted to be a potent and useful tool for the entire process and its success. Through this platform APAAL ensured the communication between HEIs and APAAL, APAAL and Review Teams, internal and coordinating communication at APAAL of all reviews in terms of batches and individual institutions; AMS supported the preparation and discussion for virtual meetings between APAAL and QAA, members of the Review Teams among them and with the relative agencies. It was used at the same time as a forum for reviewers' discussion, interaction and exchange of knowledge and experience in the context of the Institutional Review Project as whole.

Through the APAAL Management System APAAL managed 35 HEIs' evaluation procedures, 80 active accounts (ASCAL's staff, institutional coordinators, reviewers, Accreditation Board Members, QAA's staff), more than 6,500 documents as Self-Evaluation reports and evidence, more than 5,000 communications between staff-reviewers-HEIs, more than 300 documents exchanged between reviewers. The AMS supported tens of real time communications and information and data exchanges about HEIs, real-time access in all documents from ASCAL database. It successfully managed the staff and student surveys, and the development of draft and final reports up to the final accreditation decision by the Accreditation Board.

Preparation of SED

The Institutional Review process started with the formal application by the Higher Education Institutions, upon invitation/request from APAAL. Institutions answered on time and very positively to APAAL invitation. Institutions that have an already valid accreditation, became part of this process too.

For the purpose of the Institutional Review, Institutions nominated and assigned an Institutional Coordinator. The Institutional Coordinators were full time employees of the relative Institutions and played an important role during the whole process; they were the main institutional contact and communication person, responsible for the documents and evidence submitted to APAAL and the review team. They were present and active in all meetings as set out in the Handbook and responsible for ensuring that the HEI meets the requirements and deadlines set by APAAL and in the handbook. In practice, Institutional Coordinators were efficient and very helpful for the entire process. At present, the Institutional Coordinators are appointed as permanent key persons for every Quality Assurance procedure run by APAAL in the framework of ordinary external reviews in Albanian HEIs.

HEIs set up a Self-evaluation team (SET), which coordinated the entire self-evaluation process in the institution. They were involved and met during the review visit and assisted the completion of the review process. The Self-evaluation teams were composed of internal staff with knowledge and professional competence in QA, and students' representatives, as equally important stakeholders in QA processes in their HEI.

In regard to student involvement, besides their role as active SET members, they became active players of the process in other ways:

- APAAL managed a parallel process with Self-Evaluation, by collecting the students' opinion through the Student Questionnaire (Survey); this was easily accessible through the student portal on the APAAL website and was run anonymously, to ensure confidentiality during the whole process;
- During the review visit, part of the agenda was dedicated to meetings with students. Review teams met with students and alumni in all HEIs involved in the Institutional review using different methods and ways; they were asked about a range of issues related to student involvement in QA processes, in decision-making, as well asking their perception, opinion, assessment or judgment about the institution's academic quality.

After each HEI's application, APAAL organised several meetings with HEI representatives: Rectors, Institutional Coordinators, and Self-evaluation Teams. The meetings with the SET were organised on site and at each institution separately. The purpose of these briefing meetings were to clarify the Institutional review process to HEIs, to enable them to understand the process and the roles of those involved. It allowed APAAL to clarify particular information about the Self-evaluation Reports, data, statistics, evidence and documents required for the process and for a successful outcome. Beyond the scheduled meetings, APAAL has been assisting HEIs with further and more specific guidance or clarification, during the whole Self-evaluation phase via AMS.

The evidence base for the Institutional Review comprised a set of information, data, facts and documents produced and collected in different ways:

- General Institutional Data; these document prepared beforehand by APAAL, helped the Review Team to understand the background, the history of the institutions and become familiar with the Albanian Higher Education context,
- The HEIs' profiles were prepared by APAAL through its Management System, based on the data collected by HEI for the process;
- The staff and student survey results, administered, collated and summarized by APAAL, during the SE phase and handed to the review team before the desk-based evaluation;

- Self-evaluation Report, produced by HEIs following the template provided in Annex 5 of the Handbook;
- Supporting evidence and documents, submitted both in English and Albanian, which covered a minimum list of information, as found in Annex 6 of the Handbook.

HEIs submitted documents to APAAL's the Self-evaluation Folder via two ways: online uploading through the APAAL AMS and delivery in hardcopy by post or in person. The hardcopy version contained a printed and an electronic CD version of the full SE Folder.

All HEIs demonstrated their interest, commitment and responsibility during this phase. They met the SED submission deadlines, as provided in the Handbook and the APAAL's HEI Review Schedules.

Self-evaluations

HEIs wrote their own self-evaluation reports (SERs), supported by a report template in the handbook. Reports were required in both Albanian and English. The review process required that self-evaluation reports were accompanied by supporting evidence – documents supporting the statements made in the SERs. Institutions were expected to ensure that these reports and supporting evidence were comprehensive and addressed each of the Evaluation Areas so that the teams could form views of the HEIs, their internal quality assurance processes and how they met the standards. HEIs were encouraged to report data, facts and evidence strictly dealing with the standards while ensuring that supporting evidence was signposted and available to the review teams. HEIs were also expected to clearly state how they thought they met the standards and what they could do to meet them more effectively.

Albanian reviewers expressed generally positive views about the quality of the institutional self-evaluations, finding them to be fit for their purpose.

QAA reviewers and lead reviewers expressed generally positive but more mixed views about the usefulness of the self-evaluations. They acknowledged that some were prepared to a good standard, and that not all HEIs were accustomed to writing such documents. However, in many self-evaluations they found less self-reflection than desired, a lack of focus on academic standards and a lack of references to supporting evidence. QAA reviewers and lead reviewers also found that the quality of written English in self-evaluations was mixed, and sometimes it was difficult to understand.

Almost every reviewer and lead reviewer found the General Institutional Data to be useful, however one observed that not all HEIs took the opportunity to analyse and comment on this data.

Staff and student surveys

Twelve weeks before each review, APAAL administered, collated, and summarised surveys issued to staff and students asking them of their experience working/studying at the institution.

Reviewers found that these were broadly fit for purposes but some viewed the information as generic, and some reviewers doubted the honesty of responses. One reviewer suggested that it would have been useful to have received information on the population of

respondents. Others suggested that it would have been helpful if the institutions had received the survey results so review teams could discuss them directly in meetings, or that the survey questions could have been more closely aligned to the State Quality Standards.

Recommendation: review the purpose and content of staff and student questionnaires to ensure that their outcomes are relevant to the purpose of a review.

Virtual Meetings

The aim of virtual team meetings was to enable review teams to meet for the first time to analyse the Self-Evaluation folder.

Team meetings took place using Skype, involving reviewers from Albania, QAA reviewers and QAA lead reviewers who chaired the meetings. These meetings required a certain level of technical confidence and competence: the “Skype for Business” system is fairly intuitive for familiar users but can be daunting for new users. For many participants, this was the first time they used such technology, and it is reassuring to find that the experience was positive for most.

Albanian reviewers found the virtual team meetings helpful and commented favourably on the good level of communication and on QAA reviewers’ level of understanding of the process.

By contrast, QAA reviewers and lead reviewers expressed more mixed views, which might be expected given their more habitual experiences of first team meetings being held face-to-face. Some found the virtual team meetings to be very satisfactory, but others drew attention to the limitations of the technology including levels of background noise and the poor quality of some links, the difficulty of engaging with all members of a large meeting, the absence of a standard agenda for the meeting, and the difficulties caused by failing to hold meetings in the designated weeks.

Recommendation: adopt a standard agenda for virtual team meetings and ensure that all reviewers are aware of what the meeting will cover and timings.

Some lead reviewers held a virtual meeting with the review manager and found it helpful in planning for the visit to the HEI. Others said that they were unaware of the possibility of such a meeting.

Recommendation: Consider whether to formalise a virtual meeting between review manager and lead reviewer before the review visit.

Additional documents

Review teams asked HEIs to provide items of additional documentation that they needed to see as a result of their desk-based evaluation of the Self-Evaluation folder, or arising from things they heard in team meeting. The collection of supporting documents enables reviewers to triangulate the evidence supporting their conclusions. HEIs were required to provide additional documents as soon as possible, and by the deadlines set by the Review Managers

Teams expressed positive but mixed views about the timeliness and adequacy of HEIs in meeting these requests. Some reviewers observed that HEIs did not provide documentation by the date requested, or failed to provide the documents that had been requested. This might suggest that review managers need to be more assertive and insistent in their requests for documents. Some HEIs provided some documents only in Albanian, which was permissible but considered problematic by some QAA reviewers since it relied on the Albania team member alone evaluating the document.

Albanian reviewers were generally satisfied with the provision of additional documentation, but a number would have preferred the visit to the HEI to be longer in duration, suggesting that they may be more likely to regard the visit itself as the primary source of evidence. It may be useful to give clearer guidance to any future reviewers about the purposes of the desk-based analysis and of the review visit.

However, the numerous comments by QAA reviewers and lead reviewers about additional documents suggests that it caused some frustration to them. We believe QAA reviewers are likely to be accustomed to a practice of using desk-based evaluations to form tentative conclusions, and to use the visit as a means of confirming those conclusions. They would therefore regard timely and complete additional documentation as being important to the process.

Feedback from HEIs shows a high level of understanding of requests for additional information, and favourable comments about the manner in which training sessions had prepared them for this. Two HEIs drew attention to the burden of translating evidence into English and to the resources required for this.

Team meetings

Review teams held a face-to-face meeting in Albania before the review visit, in order to confirm understanding of the arrangements for the visit, to agree on agendas and issues for further exploration during the visit, and to confirm the responsibilities of each member of the team. It also provided a further opportunity for reviewers to discuss their analysis of the Self-Evaluation Folder.

Reviewers were positive about the usefulness of these meetings and all but one reviewer considered them fit for purpose. Reviewers noted that the input of the Albanian team member and their local knowledge was valuable. However, reviewers noted issues about the timing, location and outcomes of these meetings.

Agenda-setting is a vital component of a review visit, and a meeting of the entire review team is important in ensuring that agendas are carefully considered and meet the needs of each team member. It is also important for ensuring all team members are ready for the start of the visit. A formalised approach to the planning and conduct of the team meeting is helpful in achieving this. The team meeting is likely to benefit from a standardised agenda, clear expectations for its outcomes, a clear expectation that each team member is to attend, as well as setting a realistic duration and establishing an appropriate location, perhaps making use of the HEI's own premises.

Recommendation: reflect on the arrangements for the face-to-face team meeting which takes place before the visit.

Review visit activities

Review visits, Purpose and character

Review visits varied from 1.5 to 3 days depending on the scale and complexity of the institution its number of units and students. Visits enabled reviewers to collect and analysis further evidence, verify the information provided in the Self-evaluation report, and make

findings under each of the Evaluations Areas and ultimately to come to an overarching judgement.

A number of Albanian reviewers expressed the view that HEIs would benefit from a better understanding of the aims and purpose of the review process, and that review teams would benefit from a clearer understanding of the context of Albanian higher education.

Many QAA reviewers and lead reviewers spoke highly of the positive aspects of review visits, in relation to working together with colleagues in different systems of higher education and to the high level of engagement by HEIs in the review process.

However, some expressed the view that some HEIs regarded the review as an exercise in compliance rather than as an opportunity for reflective self-evaluation. This supports the view, expressed above, that some self-evaluations were insufficiently reflective in nature.

HEIs expressed generally very positive views about arrangements for the visit and the conduct and professionalism of review teams. They drew attention to the good communication with the team, the high level of organisation of the visit, and the clarity of the methodology.

QAA reviewers typically followed the practice of considering their conclusions in their allocated areas in advance of visits, so they could identify what further documents they needed to see and ask for. This meant that many QAA reviewers used the review visit to clarify details and to challenge their tentative findings.

Meetings

Institutional coordinators were responsible for ensuring that the HEI staff that reviewers asked to meet was available and at the appropriate meetings. Review visits typically included meetings with leaders and managers of the HEI, quality assurance staff, academic and administrative staff, and students. Towards the end of the review visits, review teams held final meetings with senior staff at the HEI to summarise major lines of enquiry and to give the HEI a final opportunity to offer clarification or present evidence to help the team come to secure findings.

HEIs and Albanian reviewers expressed very positive views about the organisation of visits and the opportunities to present evidence and to engage in discussion. They expressed positive views about the conduct of meetings, believing that there were sufficient opportunities for discussion between the review team and staff and students. Survey feedback found that the relationships between review managers and institutional coordinators were positive and helpful.

QAA reviewers were generally satisfied with the arrangements for meetings, and the opportunities to hear from staff at HEIs, and very satisfied with their engagement with students during the review, and the helpfulness to institutional coordinators. However, there was a case of a review meeting not going ahead and tours of facilities overrunning, highlighting the importance (and challenge) of keeping review activities on schedule. Some found that insufficient time had been allowed for them, largely due to the time necessary for translation between Albanian and English during meetings. Half of the lead reviewers made observations in their survey response on working in two languages. Working in two languages within a single meeting can lead to confusion and to inefficient use of time: further guidance or training on this aspect of a review may be helpful, or the use of simultaneous translation.

Evidence

The discipline of drawing conclusions based on evidence was observed in each and every review. Some of this evidence was considered Core Information as requested and listed at Annex 6 of the Handbook. Evidence also included the General Institutional Data compiled by APAAL, staff and student survey results, the minutes of meetings held with the HEIs.

During review visits, HEIs typically provided additional evidence in response to requests from review teams. In the evaluation survey, reviewers agreed that providers had sufficient opportunity to present evidence during the review process. This did not always mean that information was provided by the HEI, but the opportunity to provide it was made. All but one reviewer were positive that evidence was sufficient to arrive at sound conclusions and judgements. Sometimes documents received on the visit were only available in Albanian, and UK reviewers had not anticipated this, nor that it meant relying on the Albanian reviewer to check the accuracy and reliability of the document. Another lead reviewer noted that while it was helpful for the Review Manager to gather all additional information received at review visits, not all items of evidence were logged, numbered and placed on the APAAL website, making it difficult to refer to them in the report, and greater discipline in this regard would have been beneficial.

Coming to conclusions and judgments

Judgement Meetings

At the end of review visits, the review teams held private meetings to come to their conclusions. This involved evaluating the evidence to reach findings and judgements against each of the Evaluation Areas.

Albanian and QAA reviewers generally agreed that judgement meetings were conducted consistently with the Handbook and in a way which led to sound judgments being reached. However, a number expressed a view that the nature and wording of the Standards made it difficult to ensure that discussion remained relevant to the Standard in question. For QAA reviewers, the difference between the character of Albanian standards and their UK equivalents may have contributed to this. The role of the review, the judgements and the report in informing the Accreditation Council's decision is important and one that should be emphasised to QAA reviewers. Additional guidance, and perhaps examples, on the interpretation of the Standards in the context of the Albanian system might be useful.

Conclusions and judgements achieved in the Albanian context

The methodology divided the State Quality Standards between five evaluation areas, as set out in the Handbook.

- 1 The organisation and its management
- 2 Resourcing
- 3 The curriculum
- 4 Teaching, learning, assessment and research
- 5 Students and their support

The judgements for each of the Evaluation Areas were made according to a 4-level scale and expressed as follows:

- i. The Standards for [area name] are fully met
- ii. The Standards for [area name] are substantially met
- iii. The Standards for [area name] are partly met
- iv. The Standards for [area name] are not met.

To make these judgements, reviewers started by agreeing findings for each of the Evaluation Areas. These findings were categorised as follows:

- features of good practice;
- weaknesses;
- recommendations for action by the HEI (classified according to the urgency with which the team considered each recommendation should be addressed);
- affirmations of courses of action that the HEI has already identified.

Based on the judgement and findings for each of the Evaluation Areas, the review team will come to a summary judgement for the whole Institutional Review, which will be expressed as one of the following:

- i. The State Quality Standards are fully met
- ii. The State Quality Standards are substantially met
- iii. The State Quality Standards are partly met
- iv. The State Quality Standards are not met.

Reviewers made use of further information on the methodology for making the overall judgement available at Annex 11 in Handbook.

Reviewers, both QAA and Albanian, and lead reviewers expressed confidence that they had used the State Quality Standards and Annex 10 of the Handbook in forming their judgements, with only a few isolated comments about too little priority being given to the handbook. Nevertheless, their comments and the wording of reports suggest that there may be room for improvement in the wording and layout of Standards and about the guidance given to review teams.

- (a) There was a strong and clearly-expressed view by QAA reviewers and lead reviewers that a more clearly stated set of Standards is desirable. Reviewers drew attention to duplication between Standards, ambiguity about what is being considered within each Standard, and a lack of guidance about how to interpret and apply Standards. Some HEIs expressed similar views, that some Standards are unclear and/or repetitive.

Recommendation: consider reviewing the wording of the Standards to ensure clarity and lack of repetition

- (b) The Handbook identifies “Examples of Good Practice” which may support the achievement of each Standard. The “Supplementary Guidance for Reviewers” draws a distinction between practice which meets the criteria for a finding of ‘Good Practice’ and practice which is merely meets “Standard Guidelines”. Nevertheless, some reports showed confusion about the interpretation of the “Examples of Good Practice”. This may have contributed to the considerable variation in the number of Features of Good Practice identified at different HEIs, ranging from 0 to 16. There is

no evidence to suggest that review teams have failed to exercise good judgement in respect of identifying Features of Good Practice.

The Supplementary Guidance affirms that Good Practice:

- should refer to practice within the HEI and not be defined against practice elsewhere;
- should be underpinned robustly by evidence;
- should be something beyond the baseline expectation;
- should be practice that an HEI could implement throughout the HEI for the benefit of students

and it could also be added that the wording of Good Practice might be expected to contain an indication of its impact; that is, the benefit which this good practice brings about. The clarification offered in the Supplementary Guidance on Good Practice, while well intended, appears to have confused those who were briefed on Good Practice originally at training.

To ensure that consistency can be demonstrated it may be helpful to include in any future Handbook a clearer definition of “Good Practice”, including the aspects referred to in the “Supplementary Guidance for Reviewers”.

Recommendation: that the references to ‘Good Practice’ in the State Quality Standards be replaced by ‘Sound Practice’ or ‘Core Practice’ to avoid such confusion

Recommendation: that the Handbook should contain a clear definition of ‘Good Practice’

- (c) Although the Handbook draws attention to the role of European Standards and Guidance (ESG) in assessing whether an HEI operates in accordance with Albanian State Quality Standards, no reviewers mentioned the use of the ESG within a review or in a report, and reports generally make little if any mention of the ESG. This suggests that there is scope for review teams to use the ESG more in their work.

Recommendation: Consider whether references to the ESG are desirable, and if so strengthen guidance to review teams, or expression in the judgement criteria.

- (d) The “Supplementary Guidance for Reviewers” requires reports to identify the degree of urgency with which a recommendation should be addressed. Despite this guidance, many review teams failed to do so in their draft reports. This makes it harder for the HEI to in prioritise the elements of its response to the report, potentially weakening its enhancement of the student experience. It may be help to ensure consistency in reporting if the “Supplementary Guidance for Reviewers” were to make clear in what ways a review team might express ‘urgency’, for instance by setting a date by which the recommendation should have been completed.

Recommendation: that guidance to review teams should clarify how the level of urgency of recommendations may be expressed.

- (e) Guidance does not require reports to include any discussion of the basis on which judgements have been reached. In accordance with the Handbook, reports generally do not explicitly identify which Standards are met or are not met. As a result, reports are generally not transparent in that they do not explain how the judgement criteria in Annex 10 of the Handbook have been used to reach a

conclusion. Changes to the guidance in the Handbook in this respect would be likely to greater transparency in reports.

Recommendation: consider whether to increase transparency by requiring reports to explain how the judgement criteria have been used to reach conclusions

- (f) The Handbook does not suggest that there should be any distinction between the importance of the various Standards. Nevertheless, some may be regarded as being an essential part of a sound educational system, while others might be regarded as contributors to enhancement. HEIs might benefit from guidance on whether particular standards are mandatory. This might in turn require different guidance on the structure of reports, to ensure that they include both a description of mandatory elements as well as an evaluation of the HEI's arrangements for enhancement.

Recommendation: consider whether standards should be identified as 'mandatory' or 'enhancement-based', and if so consider whether judgement criteria should be adjusted accordingly

- (g) Two HEIs expressed concern that, in their view, the review team had not sufficiently taken into account evidence that they had presented, or had ignored the HEI's comments on the draft report. These perceptions may be a consequence of lack of transparency in the presentation of conclusions, as referred to at (e) above.

Post-visit activities

Review report writing

After the site visit to the HEI the review team drafted the review reports in English. Preparation of the reports started during the review visit and continued through written communication between the review team members. The Lead Reviewers coordinated this process with assistance from Review Managers.

Reports were written concisely although the word limit increased after batch 1 reviews from 12,000 to 17,000. This enabled teams to provide enough detail to be of maximum use to the HEI and to the Accreditation Council. The reports provided descriptive and evaluative information on each HEI in a succinct and readily accessible form, with findings are backed by adequate and identifiable evidence, clear recommendations supported with evidence.

Reports followed the review report template provided at Annex 12 of the Handbook, covering all five Evaluation Areas, and providing the findings of the review team against each of these areas. It concluded with the summary judgement. The report content was agreed by all members of the team. The use of a report template was helpful for developing consistency in the style of reports.

Reviewers and lead reviewers expressed generally positive views about the report-writing process, including that report writing took place on time, that reports were based on sufficient evidence including staff and student questionnaires.

Reviewers drew attention to a number of areas that would be useful to reflect on.

- (a) Responses from lead reviewers, while positive, showed a marked difference in response to the survey question on the quality of report text from their review colleagues. Lead reviewers were responsible for compiling reviewers' text into a

single report, and expressed generally positive views about this role. However, a number of lead reviewers found this task challenging. The reasons cited were the lack of experience of this style of writing on the part of Albanian reviewers, as well as their lack of familiarity with writing in English. Some lead reviewers spent considerable time editing the text produced by reviewers. However, Albanian reviewers commented very favourably on the open nature of discussion within the team leading up to the preparation of the report, and on the strongly collaborative work of review teams.

Recommendation: further training for new reviewers in report writing, and/or coaching for new reviewers when they write their first report

- (b) Lead reviewers were generally satisfied with the level and nature of evidence used by reviewers to support conclusions. Reviewers and lead reviewers were also generally satisfied with the manner in which the outcomes of surveys of staff and students were used to support conclusions, but expressed caution about low response rates.

Recommendation: consider making the results of staff and student surveys available to HEIs for their comments and enhancement prior to a review visit

- (c) A clear schedule was set for the preparation of reports, and both reviewers and lead reviewers generally found that the schedule was followed, with a small number of exceptions. Feedback suggests that deadlines were missed in some isolated cases and reviewer suggested it was because some underestimated the time a report takes to write, and because of the pressure of working on several reports at the same time.
- (d) The Handbook includes clear and explicit guidance on the structure of reports. Reports generally follow this structure. Neither reviewers nor lead reviewers have made any comments about this guidance, suggesting that it was found to be helpful and appropriate in ensuring completeness and consistency of reports. In draft reports there was inconsistency in including, or not, a list of all items of evidence: it should be the norm that this is included so the HEI can read with ease understand the references to documents in the report.

Role of the Agencies in comments and feedback

QAA arranged for independent members of staff to read and comment on the draft reports before finalisation. Several lead reviewers commented favourably on the helpful nature of their comments, while one observed that the comments showed a lack of familiarity with the Albanian HE system. Lead reviewers also commented that APAAL, including Review managers, did not contribute to the preparation of reports, although draft reports were available to them. It may be useful to clarify the review manager's role, if any, in developing the draft report, other than sending it to the HEI.

Recommendation: clarify the Review manager's role in finalising the report.

Roles and performance within the review

Introduction

Review teams were composed of three to six peer reviewers, depending on the size, scope and complexity of the HEI to be reviewed. Each team included at least two reviewers appointed by the QAA from a UK HEI and at least one appointed by APAAL from an Albanian HEI. The Handbook sets out the criteria for appointment.

'Reviewers appointed by QAA are generally senior members of staff in a UK HEI, with substantial experience of teaching or quality management within their institution, and with experience of working within QAA's review methods.'

In all cases, **Lead Reviewers** were a UK member of the review team, taking the lead in respect of coordinating and communicating the work of the team. In addition, the Lead Reviewer chaired meetings of the team and compiled and edited the team's report.

Lead Reviewers held, or had recently retired from, senior posts in a UK HEI with substantial experience of quality management within their institution, and with a substantial record of working to a high standard within QAA's review methods for several years.

The **Review Manager** was a member of APAAL staff whose role monitored the progress of reviews, facilitated the work of the review team and advised the HEI on the review process.

Evaluation of Reviewers

Albanian reviewers generally expressed very positive views about the experience of working with UK reviewers, typically noting the high level of participatory teamwork, the open and transparent nature of the process, and the experience and expertise of QAA reviewers.

QAA reviewers were also generally positive about the work of their team. However, one reviewer and two lead reviewers drew attention to the challenges faced by Albanian reviewers, noting the difficulty of working in English, of working in a collegiate manner within a team and of participating in open discussion.

Review teams found working on overlapping reviews a challenge and some speculated that this may have caused considerable challenges in meeting deadlines.

HEIs expressed generally very positive views about the work of review teams, drawing attention to their professionalism and the smooth organisation of review visits.

Within the UK, QAA review teams typically include a student reviewer who is a current or recent student in a UK HEI. The additional perspective on academic standards and, in particular, the quality of the student experience offered by a student reviewer often makes a valuable contribution to the work of a review team.

Recommendation: APAAL to consider using student reviewers in future reviews

Evaluation of Lead Reviewers

Survey responses showed that reviewers scored Lead Reviewers highly (and therefore positively) in their evaluations. Sample comments include, 'our Lead Reviewers were excellent and very dedicated', 'a fine example of consensus management in the face of difficulty', and 'in the production of reports he was always very kind and effective'. Reviewers noted the pressure faced by Lead Reviewers in carrying out their roles in an unfamiliar environment, and expressed very positive views about how they had met these challenges.

Albanian reviewers were also very positive about the work of Lead Reviewers, typically expressing the view that they fulfilled their role well.

Reviewers generally

Lead reviewers were positive in evaluating the teams that they worked with, including in relation to their use of evidence, participation in discussions, making judgements, and identifying good practice, recommendations and affirmations.

Albanian Reviewer's role

The role of the Albanian reviewer was seen by QAA reviewers as very useful to the process, both in strengthening the team's understanding of the Albanian system of higher education and in assisting in translation both in meetings and of documents received. Many reviewers noted that working with Albanian colleagues was one of the most positive features of the review process. However, in an isolated case, a team considered the English language skills of one Albanian reviewer as too weak and counter to the requirements of the Handbook, leading to some tensions in the team.

Evaluation of Review Managers

Two individuals carried out the role of Review Managers for all reviews, leading to a consistent and understood approach to the role. Reviewers noted and welcomed this consistency.

Reviewers and lead reviewers expressed very positive views about the help and advice offered by review managers, who were considered 'outstanding' in one piece of feedback, and 'extremely helpful in guiding discussion when asked to contribute and intervened only in cases when the reviewers were straying beyond their brief. Some had a prior virtual meeting with the Review Manager and found this useful, while others did not and seemed to be unaware that this could or should have happened. It may be helpful to formalise such meetings in future.

Some lead reviewers gave feedback that indicated they were confused about the role of the Review Managers, and that they would benefit from more training and greater clarity on the division of responsibilities.

Reviewers expressed positive views about the work of Review Managers, and found their advice valuable in the preparation of agendas. Albanian reviewers were uniformly supportive of the work of Review Managers.

Providers expressed very positive views about the relationship between the HEI and the Review Manager and found that Review Managers were helpful and professional in their approach to their role.