
Guiding Principles for Tertiary Level Educational Establishments

on External Quality Assurance

Introduction

Paradigmatic shift in higher education sphere driven by globalization tendency has brought forth emergence of mass education system as opposed to elite one. Tertiary level education system is now called upon to train citizens with transferable knowledge capable of functioning in an ever-changing environment. Never before has the role of quality education provisions in economic development of a country been emphasized to such an extent and educational establishments bear the sole responsibility for it.

Within the frames ANQA is delegated the authority for applying various quality assurance approaches to maintain and enhance the quality of professional education in tertiary education in Armenia. On-going internal quality assurance carried out by tertiary educational establishments is the basis for the new quality assurance framework developed by ANQA. The evaluative underpinning of internal quality assurance processes is backed up by cyclical external quality assurance processes. Along with safeguarding the quality of tertiary education provisions ANQA is also responsible to regularly provide updated, relevant information and resources to facilitate the process.

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External Reference Points

What is the role of the National Qualifications Framework?

The Armenian National Qualifications Framework (ANQF) is a system of qualifications levels and is used to describe the Armenian qualifications system. It provides information on each level and information on the award-types. ANQF sets out the levels against which a qualification can be recognized both locally and internationally. It helps learners make informed decisions about the qualifications they want to pursue, by comparing the levels of different qualifications and identifying different progression routes. The accreditation of qualifications makes sure they are of a high quality and that they meet the needs of all stakeholders. All accredited qualifications are awarded based on ANQF levels.

The ANQF consists of ... levels. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skills and competence i.e. what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning.

The aim of the ANQF is to facilitate access (entry) to education and training, transfer within and between education and training and progression within and between education and training. The introduction of the ANQF has provided a tool by which qualifications gained outside the state can be recognized.

Quality Assurance is central to the recognition of the qualifications outlined in the ANQF. ANQA bears a sole responsibility to quality assure the programmes and provide for the comparability of the qualifications offered with the ANQF and EQF levels respectively.

Why does my Institution need a Sectoral Qualifications Framework?

The issue concerning “sectoral qualifications framework” (SQF) has risen in some extent in the recent years. First, the objective is to make visible and understandable the qualifications awarded by sectors (institutions), to create a mutual trust with national and European authorities. Second, it aims at relating these qualifications to the ANQF and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The SQF sets out peculiarities of qualifications, expressed in generic outcomes, offered at individual institutions. The institutional strategy should take SQF as a frame of reference and be in coherence with it. It is one of the main frames of references during the quality assurance processes carried out by the ANQA.

What are the standards for QA?

It is recommended that instead of standards for academic programme, benchmarking of the latter to be performed. Benchmarking is setting minimal standards for student performance widely accepted by the stakeholders: the government, academic community, professional associations, employer unions, and society at large. Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards for academic degrees in broad subject areas. They are about the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and they define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject. They are benchmarks of the level of intellectual demand and challenge represented by an academic degree in the subject area concerned.

Benchmarking is an ever-evolving process. Prior to embarking on quality assurance processes, ANQA, on a regular basis, will facilitate benchmarking process through broad involvement of the academic community itself and ANQA experts for the main areas of study. In addition, to make the standards applicable in practice involvement of professional associations and professional bodies is encouraged while developing benchmarks. To make the standards comparable at international level involvement of international experts in the process is essential.



National Student Assessment System

As a result of globalization and diversification of tertiary education, a variety of student assessment systems has emerged. While a sign of institutional autonomy, such kind of approach makes readability and comparability of student credentials questionable. To ensure readability and comparability of the credentials obtained by students, therefore student mobility both at national and international levels, a dire need for aligning the various assessment systems through establishing a National Student Assessment Framework (NSAF) has arisen. The NSAF will provide for the following:

- Alignment of the various assessment systems
- Types of student assessment
- Methods of assessment and their ties with learning outcomes.

National Credit System

ECTS is a learner-centered system for credit accumulation and transfer based on the transparency of learning outcomes and learning processes. It aims to facilitate planning, delivery, evaluation, recognition and validation of qualifications and units of learning as well as student mobility. ECTS is widely used in formal higher education. To regulate the diversity of approaches to credit allocation in the Republic of Armenia alignment between the programmes is made possible through establishing a National Credit System (NCS). The NCS will facilitate access (entry) to education and training, transfer within and between education and training and progression within and between education and training.

Only the credits earned through quality assured programmes are recognized for student mobility.

What is the Quality Framework?

The Quality Framework (QF) for tertiary education is a tool developed by ANQA to facilitate systematic analysis of the learning environment in terms of the quality of educational provisions – current status and activities for enhancement, barriers to achievement, and initiatives and prospects for future improvement. It is designed to address both the issues of a holistic approach to evaluating each of the domains of an institution and to scrutinize them separately. It serves as a background for external quality assurance processes. Considering the multiple components covering the full range of educational provisions the following main domains have been identified:

- **Institutional capacity**- Institutional capacity describes what is essential for sustainable, high quality, accessible student services.
- **Academic programs** – the responsiveness and flexibility of the program provisions to the market demands creates a favorable background for preparing specialist capable of functioning in the ever-changing market milieu. Therefore, deliberate actions undertaken in the sphere of program design, monitoring, approval and evaluation is critical for successful education provisions.
- **Knowledge management** – knowledge management refers to the concept of efficient and effective knowledge processing and creating prospects for its applicability. It also targets ties of research the institution conducts with and methods of its integration into the curricula as well as provides methods for effective knowledge development and dissemination.
- **Focus on students** – mass education implies to the fact that graduates should be competent enough to function in ever-changing environment and have transferable skills. Results of such kind of orientation are better when students and teachers work in harmony, based on mutual respect and understanding and students are provided with more independence and flexibility to learn. The end result is cultivating learning skills in students, which will help them learn throughout the whole life.
- **Information management** – the right information management refers to the concept of obtaining, sifting, disseminating information about the changes at different levels (institutional, national, international) in an efficient and timely manner. On top of that, provisions for transparency and publicity are critical for service effectiveness.
- **Financing** - funding mechanisms can encourage or hinder high quality provisions of education, adequately resource a workforce, and create affordable education for individuals and the community as well as multiply the institutional prospects.
- **Quality culture** – quality depends on a culture of reflection, openness to critical evaluation, and search for continuous improvement. Therefore, ANQA emphasizes the role of strong internal quality assurance mechanisms promoting quality culture as well as that of learning.

In order to ensure the educational provisions do support a learning environment conducive to productive learning ANQA has identified six dimensions against which each domain will be measured. Consideration of dimensions is inherent to the success of the domain performance.

- **Acceptability** - refers to the provisions for the students to actively and collaboratively participate in the educational process with respect to institutional capacity, academic programmes and the like in a dynamic and responsive way. Further, stakeholder participation in the process will enhance the level of acceptability of educational provisions in which the latter meets or exceeds the set standards and



the expectations of stakeholders.

- **Accessibility** - the educational provisions should be based on needs, irrespective of geography, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age, sex or impairments. This dimension is related to what extent the education provisions are accessible to the beneficiaries without the barriers of distance (distant learning, e-learning), discrimination (ethnicity, orientation, age, SES and the like), affordability and restriction to services, and encompasses the objective of quality.
- **Appropriateness** - refers to applying up-to-date methods, materials and technologies for training the right specialists at the right time while avoiding over and under utilization. The expected outcomes should meet the set standards and be marketable as well as should exceed the negative consequences by a sufficiently wide margin.
- **Effectiveness** - the beneficiaries of the educational provisions should expect that the competences, skills and knowledge they receive will produce measurable benefit (in %). The effectiveness of educational provisions relates to which extent the approaches to teaching and learning achieves the desired outcomes.
- **Efficiency** - involves achieving desired results using the most effective use of resources. This can be achieved through the allocation of resources to services that provide the greatest benefit to students by reducing costs and minimizing waste.
- **User Protection** - a major objective of any educational provision should be student/user protection. Obliteration caused from the educational provisions, by omission or commission, as well as from the educational environment it is carried out must be avoided and potential risks minimized. Both internal and external quality assurance policies should safeguard national academic standards for tertiary level education and assure quality of educational provisions and ongoing enhancement.

What is Quality Assurance Framework?

For assuring quality at Armenian tertiary level education ANQA has developed a comprehensive Quality Assurance Framework, which revolves around six mechanisms. The six mechanisms are evaluated against the evaluation criteria and standards developed by ANQA. The aim is to guide institutions in self-assessment as a basis for assessing institutional and programme performance and to identify needed areas of improvement. The criteria, standards and performance indicators promulgated by ANQA are reviewed and modified periodically to ensure they are current, valid, relevant and consistent with the emerging trends and developments in the field of quality assurance and accreditation universally.

The six mechanisms are:

- **Accreditation** - programme accreditation entails the evaluation of higher education academic programmes in accordance with subject area standards and ANQA's programme accreditation criteria, which stipulate the minimum requirements for programme input, process, output, review, and impact.
- **Assessment** - is another component within ANQA's jurisdiction. The output of assessment is a quantitative evaluation, a grade assessing how good the outputs are. Assessment focuses on the level of knowledge acquisition and is held in between programme accreditation cycles. Within its processes ANQA envisions assessment of academic programmes. This kind of assessment is envisioned to be one of the high priority aspects for assigning a status and should be sufficiently objective and transparent.
- **Audit** – audit of institutions as well as internal quality assurance mechanisms evaluates an institution's policies, systems, strategies and resources for quality management of the core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. Audit emphasizes quality management, which encompasses arrangements for quality assurance, quality support and enhancement, and quality monitoring, and covers aspects of input and process as well as outcomes.
- **Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms** – Educational establishments should have internal quality assurance mechanisms in use ensuring continuity of its functioning. They should make use of self-assessment information to understand performance and thus contribute to continual improvement thus enlarging organization's capacity to manage accountability and improvement responsibilities. Internal quality assurance is at the heart of external quality assurance.
- **Information Provision:** - a range of information about Armenia's tertiary level education should be made publicly available. This will provide for transparency of educational provisions.
- **Recognition** – To ensure ANQA's quality assurance provisions are valid and acceptable at international level ANQA envisions undergoing a periodic external review by international agencies based on specific standards comparable to the European ones, a process widely known as recognition.



What is State Register for Academic Programmes?

State Register for Academic Programmes (SRAP) is the only state authorized register eligible to keep records regarding the status of academic programmes offered at the Armenian tertiary education. RA Government will rely solely on the data generated by the SRAP. To be visible at international level all the programmes recognized by the RA Government should be registered in the SRAP.

ANQA bears the sole responsibility for providing independent and reliable information on the status of academic programmes. The data in the SRAP, both for the existing and new programmes, is generated through the reports provided by ANQA.

All the programmes registered in the SRAP are subject to cyclical accreditation.

The RA Government decides on award allocation based on the SRAP data, which is periodically updated.

All the data entering the SRAP are preserved in the archive and are publicly available.



Quality Assurance of the Armenian Tertiary Education

ANQA Quality Assurance Guiding Principles

ANQA is committed to safeguarding the public from below-standard education provisions and to ensure public recognition and credibility through the maintenance of standards. ANQA quality assurance provisions are based upon the following principles:

- the ANQA evaluation and quality assurance provisions should be understandable to stakeholders, effectively administered, publicly accountable and cost effective to operate.
- the ANQA quality assurance criteria, which define the performance required of the applicants for them to achieve the ANQA standards, should be appropriate to purpose, explicit and in the public domain.
- ANQA quality assurance provisions should be valid, reliable and practicable, and decision-making should be in line with the set criteria.
- ANQA's responsibility for quality assurance mainly includes but is not limited to provisions of services aimed at continuous improvement and enhancement of quality education provisions. The latter is devolved to institutions where quality assurance is consistent with the maintenance of national and international standards.
- the ANQA quality assurance provisions should be accessible to all tertiary level institutions that are required to do so by law. The rest can apply for any kind of provisions on a voluntary basis. However, once pleaded, the institutions are obliged to follow ANQA's code of practice. Both institutions and academic programmes are subject to external quality assurance provisions on a cyclical basis.
- ANQA promotes quality culture throughout the tertiary level system by establishing a quality area - ANQA Area.
- ANQA functions through the ANQA Area, which requires a membership status. The institutions eligible for the ANQA Area membership shall become one only by the consent of the existing members.
- ANQA quality assurance provisions are intended to protect students from below-standard educational provisions and the outcomes should, by no means, negatively impact students.

What are the Essential Purposes of Quality Assurance?

Quality assurance provisions are a fundamental element of the external system of quality assurance of Armenian tertiary level education. Quality assurance provisions are undertaken at the institutional and programme level by ANQA, an independent body external to the tertiary level institution under review. ANQA quality assurance processes allow for periodic evaluation of how well an institution or programme is operating and whether it is delivering the intended outcomes for which it was established.

Quality assurance provisions serve two essential purposes:

- **Accountability and transparency:** quality assurance processes provide one of the key mechanisms for ensuring that the interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education are safeguarded, and for demonstrating the quality of individual higher education institutions both nationally and internationally.
- **Quality enhancement:** it provides an opportunity for an institution to undertake a broad, corporate reflection on the nature and effectiveness of its quality processes and to consider whether they are contributing to the continued development and embedding of a quality culture within the institution.

What is External Quality Assurance?

The aim of the External Quality Assurance (EQA) is to promote quality culture which will consistently contribute to achieving a quality higher education, defined as a public good, worthy of public trust, and contributing to a student's personal development and achievement. EQA also boosts up continuous improvement of the quality of life, culture and national economy.

EQA is a systematic process of inquiry designed to provide independent judgements about an institution's performance and capacity to deliver high quality education. These judgements are expressed in criteria through which two major domains will be evaluated:

- **Institutional capacity:** is the extent to which an organization uses self-assessment information to understand performance and thus contribute to continual improvement that is organization's capacity to manage accountability and improvement responsibilities.
- **Educational performance:** is the extent to which the qualifications offered by a tertiary education organization represent quality value for the learners and community at large.

Thus, EQA acts as one accountability component of an institution to stakeholders as well as a mechanism that will maintain and enhance level of educational provisions across the tertiary level sector.

For the purposes ANQA has developed a comprehensive quality assurance system, which consists of two major components:

- **ANQA Quality Framework** - includes quality concepts, domains (the components within an educational establishment affecting quality of education), dimensions (the extent to which the institution provides quality in each of the domains) as well as scales and assessment tools.
- **ANQA Quality Assurance Framework** – includes quality assurance procedures and policies. The mechanisms include but are not limited to accreditation, audit and assessment.

What is Internal Quality Assurance?

In order to provide for quality education an institution has to make sure there are certain policies, procedures and mechanisms set to maintain and enhance the quality. With this aim institutions are called upon to establish an infrastructure responsible for assuring quality education. The main components within Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) jurisdiction are as follows:

- Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.
- Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards: Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.
- Assessment of students: Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.
- Quality assurance of teaching staff: Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students are qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.
- Learning resources and student support: Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.
- Information systems: Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyze and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.
- Public information: Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

Benchmarking as a method of self-evaluation

It is widely accepted and recommended for an institution to provide for quality maintenance and enhancement through self-assessment. The latter can be carried out through benchmarking, that is setting acceptable standards by which inputs, processes and outputs can be measured or judged. Benchmarking enables an institution to identify performance gaps and develop strategies for further improvement. It involves

- examining and understanding institutional internal work procedures,
- searching for "best practices" in other institutions that match the identified practices
- adapting those practices within the institution to improve performance.

At bottom, it is a systematic way of learning from others and changing for improvement and, by no means, implies measurement of the performance although measures are used for needs assessment.

Why does my Institution Have to Participate in EQA Processes?

According to the national legislation, assuring quality education provisions through an accreditation and assessment process has been recognized as one of the effective tools for the Armenian higher education and vocational education and training sector evaluation. Within the frames, all state institutions as well as private medical institutions are subject to mandatory periodical accreditation whereas private institutions and programmes can apply for accreditation on voluntary basis only.

ANQA is responsible for safeguarding the public from below-standard education provisions and to ensure public recognition and credibility through the maintenance of standards. ANQA is also responsible for ensuring the educational establishment continues to meet standards and criteria set by the government after the license is granted. The ANQA policies and criteria require that on-going quality assurance is provided through institution's self-assessment and external evaluation and review to guarantee the society in the feasibility, validity and acceptability of the programmes at both national and international levels.

What are the Benefits my Institution will get?

Apart from the legal obligations an institution undergoing quality assurance processes ensures:

- The quality of educational provisions is maintained and enhanced
- High level of competitiveness both at national and international levels
- The credentials offered are valid and acceptable at national and international levels
- Financial aid opportunities
- Applicability of the qualifications in both academic and professional spheres and therefore, high level of graduate employability
- Transparency of the educational provisions and comparability with international counterparts
- Opportunities for growth.

What is Audit?

Quality assurance in higher education is the activity that aims at maintaining and raising quality, e.g. research, analysis, assessing acceptability, recruitment, appointment procedures and different mechanisms and systems. An independent audit conducted by the ANQA aims to provide for development and enhancement of educational provisions.

ANQA quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own explicit or implicit objectives and focuses on the effectiveness of the processes to assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning. Quality audit is a three-part process checking

- The suitability of the planned quality procedures in relation to the stated objectives
- The conformity of the actual quality activities with the plans
- The effectiveness of the activities in achieving the stated objectives

Considering the transition period, ANQA envisions a variety of actions aimed at both coordinating the innovations undertaken by various stakeholders and at promoting changes at the institutions lagging in the process for various reasons.

Given the novice of internal quality assurance mechanisms in the Armenian tertiary level education practices and the urgent need to introduce it, ANQA proposes developmental audits of institutions and programmes to become a basis for establishing internal quality assurance mechanisms at institutions during the transition period which is envisioned to last for three years. After the successful completion of the transition period and after establishing internal quality assurance mechanisms at institutions ANQA will move onto external audit provisions for internal quality assurance mechanisms exclusively.

The value of the developmental audit is that it assists the institutions in establishing quality culture and ensures the institutions and programmes are ready for assessment and accreditation. Based on the results of the developmental audit a development and enhancement package proposing changes will be prepared by ANQA. Elements of good practice both from Europe and Armenia will be included.

What is Institutional Audit?

Institutional audit is assessing and evaluating institutional performance based on the decided standards and criteria.

Institutional audit is usually based on an evaluation of whether the institution meets specified minimum (input) standards such as staff qualifications, research activities, student intake and learning resources. It might also be based on an estimation of the potential for the institution to produce graduates that meet explicit or implicit academic standard or professional competence.

Institutional audit normally applies to an entire institution, indicating that each of an institution's parts is contributing to the achievement of the institution's objectives, although not necessarily all at the same level of quality.

Institutional audit is understood as a decision of quality standard and evaluation of an educational institution (higher education institution) by ANQA. The criteria for higher education audit are varied due to the variation of interpretation of the higher education nature.

- Institutional audit is a 6-year cyclical process, which mainly stresses the educational environment and is a prerequisite for programme accreditation for the transitional period.
- In case of a negative institutional audit the programmes offered by the institution will undergo an elaborate and meticulous programme accreditation procedure, targeting all the domains outlined in the ANQA Quality Framework.
- After the transition period institutional audit will be conducted on voluntary basis.
- The programmes opting to over pass the institutional audit are subject to an elaborate and meticulous programme accreditation.
- In the event the programme opts to undergo an institutional audit procedure the programmes offered by the given institutions are entitled to undergo only programme thematic accreditation.
- It is a prerequisite that all the programmes entitled to an accreditation status be housed at the institutions that have gone through an elaborate audit procedure.
- Institutional audit is a prerequisite for credit recognition and transfer.



What is Accreditation?

Accreditation is the recognition that an institution maintains standards requisite for its graduates to gain admission to other reputable institutions of higher learning or to achieve credentials for professional practice. Accreditation is granted for a certain period of time and it guarantees that the institution or programme has the necessary capacity to provide education for a definite time span.

The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions meets acceptable levels of quality. In the Armenian tertiary education two types of accreditation are adopted:

- **Programme accreditation:** examines specific programmes of study, rather than an institution as a whole. This type of accreditation is granted to specific programmes at specific levels based on learning outcomes and the extent to which the learning outcomes are in line with the qualifications required.
- **Initial accreditation:** accreditation of newly proposed academic programmes. In the event of a positive accreditation decision the newly established programme will be registered in the SRAP.

What is Programme Accreditation?

Programme accreditation establishes the academic standing of the programme or the ability of the programme to produce graduates with professional competence to practice. This is often referred to as professional accreditation. The unit accredited may be a department or a programme within a university.

Accreditation of degree-granting academic programs is intended to provide these programs with a credential. The credential can be used by the programs and their constituencies - the general public, students and prospective students, employers, industry, and governmental bodies - to assess the quality of the program and the extent to which it achieves its own goals as well as agreed-upon educational standards. The process of programme accreditation also serves to foster self-examination by learning organizations; to develop a dialog between constituents of educational programs on content, methods, and learning outcomes; and to encourage continuous improvement of academic programs through benchmarking.

ANQA's requirement to programme accreditation is that accredited programs be housed in an institutionally audited establishment, since institutional audit is a prerequisite for credit recognition and transfer.

What is cluster accreditation?

Cluster accreditation refers to accreditation of a number of relating programmes at a time and with the same expert panel. Cluster accreditation provides for the following:

- Enables comparison between similar programmes offered by different institutions while evaluating them
- Facilitates minimal standard benchmarking while making the evaluation process objective and transparent.
- Provides for shared costs of a programme accreditation.

What is extensive programme accreditation?

Extensive programme accreditation entails evaluation of all the domains covering both programme and institutional functioning through a single programme accreditation. This activity is carried out each time an institution applies for a programme accreditation. An institution opting to apply for an extensive programme accreditation is not required to go through an institutional audit, however, has to take upon the responsibility of covering the expenses of each programme accreditation according to the extensive programme accreditation rates.

What is limited programme accreditation?

Limited programme accreditation entails evaluation of only programme matter domains that is thematic aspects, while leaving evaluation of the institutional performance domains to the institutional audit. In case of a positive institutional audit all the programmes offered at the institution are entitled to undergo only limited accreditation. Otherwise, the case of an extensive programme accreditation will apply. In case of opting for an institutional audit, the rates for limited programme accreditation will apply.

What is the Accreditation Procedure Like?

A programme seeking an accreditation status must complete several steps in the accreditation process.

Application: The institution or programme seeking accreditation sends the filled in application form to the ANQA. Following the application ANQA makes relevant arrangements for the particular institution or programme and signs a contract with the applicant.

Preparation and self-assessment: the programme seeking an accreditation status prepares materials that effectively display the programme's accomplishments and exhibit the level of quality of the areas of operation that are under scrutiny. The programme must also create a written report of its accomplishments according to the standards set by ANQA.

Peer-review: Next the programme may opt to undergo a peer review of the prepared materials, which is a voluntary process. Administrative and faculty peers conduct an intensive review of the prepared materials, written report, and the general workings of the programme seeking an accreditation status. Teams of peer reviewers visit the institution. The board comprises faculty and administrative peers in the field.

Site-visit and examination: Finally, action is taken by ANQA to determine whether accreditation will be granted to the programme. In addition to the visits made by the peer reviewers, ANQA sets up a visiting team (expert panel) for a site-visit to the programme seeking accreditation status. This team is often made up of peers and stakeholders hired and trained by ANQA based on their background qualifications and because of their strong interest in the quality standards of programmes.

Judgment action made by ANQA: After the previous steps are completed, the ANQA calls upon its Accreditation Commission to review the steps and recommend for affirmation or denial of the accreditation status for the programme under scrutiny.

Approval: the ANQA Governing Board approves the accreditation decision and recommendations outlined in the report. Afterwards, ANQA proposes relevant changes concerning the programme status in the SRAP.

Publication of the report: After the final report is agreed upon the report along with ANQA recommendations is made publicly available.

Continuous review: By accepting accreditation status, the programme agrees to undergo a review on a cyclical basis. A programme is usually required to go through all the steps of the accreditation process each time it is reviewed. The purpose of the continuous review is to ensure that the accredited programme continues to maintain and enhance the required accreditation standards. Along with accreditation, assessment of programme and institutional audit are intended to enhance the quality of educational provisions of a particular programme or institution.

What Happens during the Site-Visit?

During the site-visit the aim of the expert panel is to understand the context of the findings of the self-assessment and how the organization has interpreted and used the information. Information obtained from the self-assessment and other appropriate sources will be verified. This will include but is not limited to:

- reviewing reports, minutes of meetings, protocols
- interviews with the top management, staff, students, employers, other key persons
- Focus groups with stakeholders
- Questionnaires
- Observations

Where the self-assessment is weak or inconsistent, the expert panel will look directly at the base information.

What is assessed?

Evaluation Criteria developed by ANQA serve as a foundation and framework to guide institutions in self-assessment, as a basis for assessing institutional and programme performance and to identify needed areas of improvement.

Evaluation is conducted based on the seven domains through which quality is evaluated and recognized.

They are:

- Institutional capacity
- Academic programmes
- Focus on students
- Knowledge management
- Information management
- Financing
- Quality culture

In each of the seven domains there are criteria and respective standards set by ANQA. These criteria must be met by the programmes seeking accreditation. A programme must be judged to have met all the criteria to merit an accreditation status.

Based on the results, analyses for each standard, category and, therefore, domain is conducted. The starting points for the analyses are the six quality dimensions defined by ANQA (acceptability, accessibility, appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, and user protection).

The methods employed to achieve the stated standards will mainly look at:

- The level of loss at transfer points: input, process and output
- The methods employed to achieve minimum loss.
- A balanced approach within each domain management.

What is the assessment scale?

Based on the domain analyses, both an institution and programme are evaluated against a 5-point scale. The evaluation scales are as follows:

- **Excellent (5):** Both the institutional and programme performance indicate high level of competitiveness at the international level and are expected to make significant contribution. The final outcome has an important and substantial impact in the field. The findings made by the expert panel demonstrate high level of performance along all the domains.
- **Good (4):** Both the institutional and programme performance indicate some level of involvement at the international level. The final outcome has an important and substantial impact in the field at the national level. The findings made by the expert panel demonstrate high level of performance along all the domains with minor deviations from the stated standards.
- **Satisfactory (3):** Both the institutional and programme performance are competitive at national level and has a potential for international involvement. The final outcome has an important and substantial impact in the field at the national level. The findings made by the expert panel demonstrate medium level of performance along all the domains with some deviations from the stated standards.
- **Unsatisfactory (2):** Both the institutional and programme performance are solid and in principle worthy of support. However, the output does not contribute greatly to the country's development and therefore is not exciting. The final outcome is of less priority in the field than in the above categories. The findings made by the expert panel demonstrate low level of performance along all the domains with substantial deviations from the stated standards.
- **Very poor (1):** Both the institutional and programme performance are neither solid nor exciting and in principle are not worthy of support. The output does not contribute to the country's development at all. The findings made by the expert panel demonstrate poor level of performance along all the domains with significant deviations from the stated standards.

The final categorization is the result of expert summarization.

The criteria, standards and performance indicators promulgated by ANQA are reviewed and modified periodically to ensure they are current, valid, relevant and consistent with the emerging trends and developments in the field of quality assurance and accreditation universally.

What are the consequences of accreditation?

Accreditation status is the embodiment of the decision made by the accrediting body. Institutions and/or programs that request ANQA's evaluation and that meet the set criteria receive an *Accreditation Status*.

In principle, a programme is either accredited or it is not: a binary decision with equivalent accreditation status. As a result of the full ANQA accreditation visit, the following accreditation terms may be granted:

- **Accredited** – the term is decided based on the Accreditation Commission Report: this is an accreditation term with a written progress report due at the three-year mark to the institution's governing board demonstrating that the institution has
 - addressed the critical areas for improvement through the institution/prgramme action plan.
 - made appropriate progress on implementation of the institution/prgramme action plan.
 - improved student achievement relative to the expected institution/prgramme learning results.
- **Non-Accredited:**
 - If the programme does not meet minimum standards in a large number of criterion areas and this situation cannot be remedied in the short and medium term the quality of the programme is seriously jeopardized. The programme does not receive accreditation and the institution will not be allowed to take in new students for the programme and has to phase it out. In some cases, current students will be allowed to complete the degree by a transfer to an ANQA accredited programme.
- **Temporary recognized-** limited term (one or two-year term). Within ten days following the accreditation denial an institution/programme can apply for a temporary recognition status. This is a recognition term of one or two years with a written progress report at the end of the sixth month and revisit to serve as a warning that, unless prompt attention is given to these recommendations, accreditation may be denied. The progress report and revisit shall focus on demonstrating that the institution has:
 - addressed the critical areas for improvement through the institution/prgramme action plan.
 - made appropriate progress on implementation of the institution/prgramme action plan.
 - improved student achievement relative to the expected institution/prgramme learning results.

Maximum limit for a temporary recognition is two consecutive terms. In case of the Accreditation Commission's denial of a three-year accreditation at the end of the second term the institution is denied an Accreditation Status and institutional/programme reorganization/restructuring or overall governance reform will be recommended.



What are Quality Assurance Terms?

ANQA envisions the following terms for each QA process:

| Quality Assurance Processes | Term | Status |
|--|----------------|---|
| Institutional Audit | 6 years | Guaranteed educational environment |
| Academic Programme Accreditation | 4 years | Guaranteed professional qualifications |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor • Master | 2 years | |
| Assessment of Academic Programmes | 2 years | Guaranteed learning outcomes |



What will be in the final report?

The final report will consist of two major parts:

- The report itself, which will be detailed and present the judgements of the expert panel, the main findings and information that led to the judgements being determined. Judgements will be based on the categorizations developed by ANQA
- Recommendations.

Will the report be published?

After the final decision is made the report along with ANQA recommendations is made publicly available prior to its submission to the Ministry of Education and Science for the final approval.

What is Assessment?

Programme assessment is mainly based on assessing students' learning outcomes. The output of assessment is a quantitative evaluation, a grade assessing how good the programme outputs are. Assessment focuses on the level of knowledge acquisition that is achieved learning outcomes, and is held at definite time spans. Within its processes ANQA envisions assessment of academic programmes (AP). AP assessment is envisioned to be one of the high priority aspects for assigning a status and should be sufficiently objective and transparent.

External assessment of a programme is carried out by ANQA and can be applied in two cases as

- an integral part of the accreditation process of an academic program
- a standalone process if the department is interested in its continual improvement and development.

The ANQA assessment outcomes feed into the programme accreditation. This mechanism is applied on a cyclical basis every 2 years and targets the whole programme.

Aims of programme assessment are as follows:

- To determine the extent to which students in a departmental program can demonstrate the learning outcomes for the program.
- To analyze and describe student learning outcomes or program achievement of objectives. The fundamental purpose of the programme assessment is to provide faculty the data and information they need to ensure their programs are responsive to the needs of various stakeholder groups.
- To answer the fundamental question of whether the program offers the material expected to be mastered by any student finishing the program and whether the student did indeed master this body of knowledge. These program assessments are typically multi-pronged strategies that may include things like alumni surveys, employer surveys, or the quality of student portfolios.
- To satisfy external stakeholders to the unit itself. Results are summative and are often compared across units.

What is assessment sequence?

1. **Assessment plan:** each institution and department should develop an assessment plan prior to undertaking the assessment of its programmes. This is a document that outlines the student learning outcomes and program objectives, the direct and indirect assessment methods used to demonstrate the attainment of each outcome/objective, a brief explanation of the assessment methods, an indication of which outcome(s)/objectives is/are addressed by each method, the intervals at which evidence is collected and reviewed, and the individual(s) responsible for the collection/review of evidence.
2. **Programme self-assessment** that is gathering information about a program (i.e., a department, or a school if the school has no departments), by the faculty to analyze and describe student learning outcomes or program achievement of objectives. The fundamental purpose of the programme self-assessment is to provide faculty the data and information they need to ensure their programs are responsive to the needs of various stakeholder groups.
3. **Programme peer-assessment** - is a collaborative process designed to bring to bear the judgment of respected colleagues in assessing and improving the quality of academic units. This process involves students, faculty, community members, school and campus administrators, and external specialists in the discipline from the institutions other than the one that undergoes assessment
4. **Site visit** - reviewing and analyzing this information during a site visit
5. **Judgements** - synthesizing all available information and making judgments about overall program quality and recommendations for improvement,
6. **Following up processes** are to ensure that the unit is fully supported in its efforts to address the outcomes of the review. Within a month of the date of the site visit, external and internal reviewers will *collaborate to produce a single* written report summarizing the strengths of the program and recommending changes if these seem to be warranted. Within six months following receipt of the reviewers' report, the program faculty will draft a written response to the reviewers' report, indicating the actions to be taken to address each recommendation.
7. **Feedback loop** – the assessment sequence has a form of a feedback loop, that is the judgements and follow up procedures should feed into an assessment plan and follow the above-mentioned sequence.

The dean of the school will call a follow-up meeting within *six months to a year* of the date of the site visit for the purpose of discussing the program faculty's response to the reviewers' report. All appropriate representatives of the campus administration will be invited to this meeting in order to bring to bear all the university resources that are needed to assist the unit in making essential improvements.

In subsequent years, the program's progress in each targeted improvement area should be addressed in its *annual planning/budgeting* review.

The expert panel

ANQA sets up a visiting team (expert panel) for a site-visit to the institution or programme seeking accreditation status. This team is often made up of peers and stakeholders hired and trained by ANQA based on their background qualifications and because of their strong interest in the quality standards of higher education institutions.

ANQA appoints an Accreditation Commission and sets criteria for recruiting and appointing external experts to conduct evaluations. ANQA itself nominates candidates for expert functions, except in the case of student representatives. However, the responsibility for specific expert panel selection from the nominee pools lies with the Accreditation Commission. Nominations of student representatives are requested from national or institutional student organizations.

Institutions are given an opportunity to comment on the composition of panels before the actual appointments. There are two major groups of experts intended for institutional and programme accreditation. Both groups of experts must have competences in at least one of the following fields:

- Programme and institutional evaluation
- Programme design and monitoring
- Policy and procedure development
- Educational administration
- Quality assurance
- The discipline area under evaluation or other relevant area.

Conflict of interests

ANQA has adopted a strict conflict of interest policy for experts nominated for participation in the accreditation process.

A candidate for the expert panel is considered to have a possible conflict of interest if such individual has

- formal connections with, or functions at the institutions or programmes undergoing accreditation.
- an existing or potential financial or other interest which impairs or might appear to impair independent, unbiased judgment in discharging responsibilities on behalf of ANQA Such interests may include, but are not limited to:
 - financial or other interests in institutions/programmes seeking accreditation through ANQA
 - employment or consulting arrangements with institutions/programmes engaged in the accreditation process
 - the seeking of employment or consulting arrangements with institutions/programmes engaged in the accreditation process, without prior disclosure to the Chair of the Accreditation Commission
 - ownership of some or all of the institution/programme, its assets, or the stock of the company that owns or operates the institution/programme that is involved in the accreditation process;
 - service as an officer or director of a institutions/programmes that is engaged in the accreditation process;

If the candidate is uncertain whether a particular interest should be declared, the individual shall describe the interest in writing to the Chair of the Accreditation Commission, who will issue a binding ruling as to whether the matter in question constitutes a reportable interest.



Transitional Period

What will happen during transitional period?

Transitional Period: Launch

In view of the fact that the Armenian National Qualifications Framework (ANQF) is due to adoption in 2010, all the tertiary level academic programmes offered at Armenian institutions should be aligned with the ANQF after the RA Government decree on its adoption comes into power. The alignment process includes aligning the Sectorial Qualifications Framework with the ANQF as well as that of the latter with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) shall be transparent and shall be quality assured by ANQA.

To facilitate the alignment process ANQA envisions the following plan for the first round of accreditation:

- To start with a first round of accreditation for both the sectors: private and public.
- To use the ANQF to create alignment with the degrees offered. Considering there are not updated subject areas in place, benchmarking of academic programmes and managerial practices will be considered an alternative that can be applied as a basis for evaluation. ANQA envisions active involvement of international experts in the process.
- The first round of accreditation will commence by including all the programmes offered by state institutions in the SRAP through granting the latter a status of temporary recognized programmes. This, by no means, implies change in the current status.
- To include all the regulating programmes, both state and private, in the SRAP based on ANQA's recommendation.
- To define a time limit for the programmes accredited at private institutions that gained the status of limitless accreditation during the years 2000-2005. These programmes are also entitled to enter the SRAP with no change in the status.
- The programmes offered at private institutions, which had no prior accreditation can enter the SRAP only after going through the complete procedure leading to ANQA accreditation positive decision.
- Newly established programmes can enter SRAP only after going through ANQA's initial accreditation.

What is the scheduling during the transitional period like?

To achieve the goals set for the transitional period, scheduling will be done based on ANQA's decisions, which stem from the objectives set forth by the Government.

- Scheduling for transitional period procedures is conducted based on the agreement between the institution and ANQA. The agreement shall outline the prerogatives of both the parties.
- Once the programmes are registered in the SRAP, ANQA embarks on evaluation scheduling process, which consists of the following procedures:
- **Assessment of academic programmes** (assessing learning outcomes)
 - During the first two years of the transition period all the programmes in the SRAP are subject to go through a programme assessment procedure.
 - The results of the assessment shall feed into the institutional audit and programme accreditation and shall be one of the main starting points for final evaluation and analyzes.
- **Institutional audit** (ensuring the proper learning environment)
 - Institutional audit mainly stresses the educational environment and is a prerequisite for programme accreditation for the transitional period. In case of a negative institutional audit the programmes offered by the institution will undergo an extensive programme accreditation procedure.
 - After the transition period institutional audit will be conducted on voluntary basis.
 - The programmes opting to over pass the institutional audit are subject to an extensive programme accreditation. In the event the programme opts to undergo an institutional audit procedure are entitled to undergo only limited programme accreditation.
- **Programme accreditation**
 - ANQA will conduct two types of accreditation:
 - Initial accreditation of newly offered academic programmes
 - Accreditation of existing programmes
 - It is ANQA's responsibility to provide for transparent data on all the processes including but not limited to the status of the agreement between the parties and make them publicly available.



How are Quality Assurance Processes Scheduled?

Each year in January, based on the applications received, ANQA will determine which organizations are due for a particular QA process in the following calendar year. A draft schedule for both commences of the QA process, the site-visits and completion of the process will be developed. When an organization is scheduled, it will be advised of the proposed week for the site visit and invited to request amendments if the proposed week does not suit. A final schedule will be published on the ANQA website in April for the QA processes that are to commence the following calendar year. This means each organization will have at least 8 months notice before the site visit.

Programmes, which are subject to cluster accreditation, will be scheduled accordingly.

The exact dates in the scheduled week will be agreed with the organization at the time of the initial contact about a particular QA process. Once the schedule is published, changes will only be accepted in exceptional circumstances.

For more information contact ANQA by e-mail info@anqa.am and refer to ANQA website at www.anqa.am.