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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF UZBEKISTAN: INSTITUTIONAL REFORM, EUROPEAN ALIGNMENT, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Mansurkhon Kamalov, Janar Abuova

Abstract. This article discusses how the system of quality assurance (QA) in the Republic of Uzbekistan in higher education is changing over time in the context of the ongoing structural changes. Specific focus is placed on systemic issues regarding admissions policies, teaching quality, learning resources and student assessment practices. The research is developed in the context of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) programme, namely, the QUARTZ project (Quality Assurance for Reform and Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Uzbekistan). The paper assesses the current institutional and regulatory changes such as the creation of a national Quality Assurance Agency in 2025 through a qualitative policy analysis approach. It states that harmonizing national practices with the Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) offers a solid methodological basis to building institutional culture of quality, a better governance system, and accountability. The results indicate that, although there has been a substantial increase in access and formalization of QA structures, the issue of consistency of standards across institutions, especially the non-state ones, continues to be a problem. The article provides a series of policy and institutional recommendations to encourage a sustainable, integrated and internationally aligned quality assurance system.

Key words: Quality Assurance, Higher Education, university, Erasmus+, Capacity Building, strategies, frameworks

1. Introduction

In the last ten years, Uzbekistan has made massive reforms that have been geared towards increasing access to higher education and modernizing its governance systems. Introduction of the Law “On Education” (2020) and following regulatory acts has enabled the diversification of the institutions of higher learning (HEIs), such as the rapid development of non-state universities and the opening of international branch campuses. These changes have led to a tremendous rise in enrollment levels and accessibility of higher education in general.

Nonetheless, the booming growth of the sector has brought about new challenges, notably in terms of assuring the sustainability of higher education. Variations in the standards of admission, inconsistent quality of teaching, disparities in the availability of learning resources, and inconsistencies in the practices of assessing students have cast doubt on the sustainability and effectiveness of existing reforms. QA, in this context, is not just to be viewed as a regulatory imperative but as a systemic enhancement strategy and institutional growth process.

The present research was created in the context of the Erasmus + Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) programme, namely, the QUARTZ project (Quality Assurance of Reform and Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in



Uzbekistan). The project offers a platform to enhance national and institutional QA systems by embracing and adopting them.

Implementation of international best practices

Specifically, the article highlights the applicability of the ESG as a conceptual and methodological framework. By matching the approaches on a national level with the principles of ESG, it is possible to build the coherent QA system that promotes the culture of quality, improves governance, and guarantees accountability, though it should be responsive to the particular conditions in the country.

This article is intended to examine the modern situation regarding quality assurance in the system of higher education in Uzbekistan and suggest the directions of its further evolution relying on the experience of other countries and the on-going national changes.

The article contributes to the literature in three ways: (1) it demonstrates the structural inconsistencies of the QA model in Uzbekistan; (2) it analyzes the limitations of the ESG adaptation of transitional systems; (3) it suggests a hybrid system of QA, which combines regulatory and institutional elements.

2. Conceptual Foundations of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance concept in higher education is widely discussed in the literature and that is why it is multi-dimensional and lacks the definition that could be considered universal. Vlasceanu, Grunberger and Parlalea (2004) define quality assurance as all policies, processes, and activities that uphold and build quality higher education provision. Harvey and Green (1993) have most notoriously defined quality as a relative and contested concept and singled out five different ways of understanding quality: quality as exception (excellence), quality as perfection (consistency), quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation. Among them, the so-called fitness-for-purpose approach has gained particular prominence in the QA systems, whereby the institutions are able to determine quality based on their missions, and objectives, whereas the so-called transformation perspective focuses on the value added to education in terms of knowledge, skills, and capabilities of the students. More recently, a synthesis of these perspectives has been advocated by the European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2015), which describes QA as the ongoing evaluation, monitoring and improvement process where all stakeholders are involved, which has the accountability and the improvement purposes.

In modern literature, two prevailing paradigms of QA methods are identified: the accountability paradigm and the improvement paradigm (Elassy, 2015). The accountability paradigm which is commonly linked with the external quality assurance mechanisms focuses on the transparency, adherence to the standards and the delivery of the credible information to the stakeholders, such as the government, employers and the general population. Conversely, the improvement paradigm emphasizes on the processes that take place internally, organizational learning and creating a culture of quality that creates an intrinsic drive toward improvement. Avacedo (2019) states that excessive focus on external accountability measures can result in a so-called ritualistic



compliance, whereby institutions undertake QA efforts with more of a ritual than a commitment to improvement. On the other hand, a moderate strategy incorporating external assessment and high internal ownership has been demonstrated to yield more sustainable results on quality. Other studies, such as those by El-Khawas (2013) also indicate that the key features of successful QA systems include flexibility to institutional diversity, the use of evidence-based decision-making, and the involvement of academic staff as participants instead of objects of evaluation. This literature emphasizes the fact that QA is not just a technical or administrative practice but a socio-cultural process that is deeply rooted in the institutional values, leadership and in the professional identity of the academic communities.

Quality assurance in higher education can simply be perceived as a process of constant and systematic monitoring, appraisal, and improvement in terms of education provision so as to determine its adherence to specified standards and its sensitivity to the expectations of the stakeholders. QA in the modern higher education system is increasingly considered as a component of control and as an initiator of institutional development and constant improvement.

Two complementary aspects of quality assurance can be typically distinguished:

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA): internal processes and mechanisms that focus on preserving and enhancing quality, such as curriculum design, student-centered learning strategies, faculty assessment, and feedback systems;

External Quality Assurance (EQA): works done by external agencies like accreditation, audits, and external reviews to make sure that there is accountability and transparency of higher institutions of learning.

Mature QA system should have a dynamic balance between external and internal processes where external assessment promotes, but does not eliminate institutional responsibility of quality.

The notion of quality culture, in this aspect, is central. The culture of quality may be referred to as a combination of values, beliefs, expectations and practices in an institution that foster a unanimous desire to improve quality. It is a combination of structural (policies, procedures, standards) as well as cultural (attitudes, engagement, ownership) elements.

In Uzbekistan, quality assurance has become a concept of specific interest with respect to the recent massive reforms that were introduced in 2025 and that signified the shift to a more institutionalized and structured approach to QA. One of the milestones was the Presidential Decree No. UP-76 (May 5, 2025), which included more measures to focus on the quality of education and enhance the system of providing educational services. This reformation formed the basis of a nationwide QA system.

The Presidential Resolution No. PQ-275 (September 8, 2025) that created the National Agency of Quality Assurance in Education under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, ensured further institutional development. Establishment of this agency is a major move towards improving the external quality assurance systems, improving the accountability of the institutions and providing uniformity in the standards applied throughout the education system.



Simultaneously, the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 498 (August 6, 2025): presented a system of comprehensive and specialized state accreditation of educational institutions of all levels, including higher and postgraduate education. This reform is an indication of a change towards more differentiated and performance based evaluation models.

Also, the Order of the Director of the National Agency (Reg.). The detailed indicators and criteria of assessment of higher education institutions were approved in No. 3732, December 23, 2025) as part of state accreditation. These standards offer operational mechanisms of QA process implementation and transparency and comparability of evaluation outcomes.

Notably, these national reforms align in theory with the ESG, which prioritize student-centered learning, institutional autonomy, accountability, and continuous improvement. The ESG framework emphasizes the significance of institutionalizing the QA processes into the institutional governance and making them consistent with the strategic development objectives.

In the case of Uzbekistan, the inclusion of ESG principles more specifically in the context of the Erasmus+ CBHE QUARTZ project offers a systematic approach to changing a more or less compliance-driven model into a more developmental and quality culture-focused model that would be adjusted to national priorities and institutional diversity.

3. Key Challenges in Ensuring Quality in Uzbekistan

Although there has been a considerable advance in the provision of higher education, Uzbekistan still has several structural issues that influence the integrity and the quality sustainability of education. These issues are directly connected with both input (student preparedness and teaching capacity) and process (learning resources and assessment systems) factors. These problems must be addressed in order to have a successful implementation of a comprehensive quality assurance framework.

Unequal admission requirements among state and non-state institutions of higher education have led to unequal preparedness of students. Admissions are a very important input variable as far as quality assurance is concerned, and they have a direct impact on the outcome of learning, the rate of progress and the overall performance of the institution.

Lack of cohesive minimum admission standards especially in the non-state sector poses threats of erosion of academic standards amid the backdrop of the skyrocketing access. As much as greater enrollment helps in social inclusion, it has to be counterbalanced with mechanisms that guarantee minimum academic competencies.

Admission policies must be transparent, fair and program-related, as per the ESG principles. This would be achieved by setting national standards and uniform criteria to help provide more uniformity of institutions and improve the legitimacy of the higher education system.

3.1 Quality of Teaching and Development of Academic Staff



Faculty competence is a pillar of educational quality, and a focal point of internal quality assurance systems. Nonetheless, a number of issues prevail in the Uzbek situation, such as:

- Less attention to pedagogical preparation and contemporary teaching techniques;
- Lack of incorporation of research activities in the teaching process;
- Absence of systematic frameworks of ongoing professional development (CPD).

Academic staff development in higher education systems that are consistent with ESG is systematically integrated into the QA frameworks. Institutions must not only prove the qualification of its personnel, but also that there are a mechanism in place to enhance the effectiveness of teaching.

In Uzbekistan, the recent production of national QA standards and accreditation criteria in 2025 offers a chance to solidify such demands and to incorporate staff development into the institutional QA strategies.

3.2 Learning Resources and Digital Infrastructure

Another dimension of educational quality that is critical is the availability and quality of learning resources. In spite of the continuous investments, there is still a lot of discrepancy between institutions in terms of access to:

- Digital learning platforms;
- Open educational resources (OER);
- Laboratory and research facilities.

The differences cause unequal learning conditions and could be detrimental to student performance. In the ESG framework, the institutions are supposed to make sure that there are sufficient and accessible learning resources to facilitate student-centered learning.

The reinforcement of digital infrastructure and the facilitation of equal access to educational resources, in turn, need to be viewed as a priority in the national QA policies and institutional development approaches.

3.3 Student Assessment Systems

In most institutions of higher learning, assessment procedures have largely been centred on summative assessment, which has largely been more oriented on reproduction of knowledge as opposed to building competencies.

Key challenges include:

- Limited use of competency-based assessment methods;
- Inadequate systems of formative feedback;
- Issues with transparency and objectivity of grading.
- Limited use of competency-based assessment methods;
- Lack of proper application of formative feedback systems;
- Issues of grading practices in terms of transparency and impartiality.

Recent QA strategies, especially those based on ESG, focus on the significance of learning outcomes-based assessment, where assessment strategies are directly



associated with the target competencies. This necessitates a move to more diversified and student centered assessment methods, such as continuous assessment, project based evaluation and reflective learning tools.

Regulation on the basis of accreditation criteria and performance indicators introduced recently in Uzbekistan offers an opportunity to enhance assessment practices. Nonetheless, institutional capacity and willingness of faculty to embrace new strategies will be key to successful implementation.

4. Institutional Reform: Establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (2025)

One of the most significant achievements in the process of quality assurance in Uzbekistan was the creation of a centralized institutional structure in 2025, which is the shift to a more systematic and state-coordinated way of providing education quality.

The Presidential Decree No. UP-76 (May 5, 2025) was the first step of this reform as it proposed some additional measures to improve the quality of education and the whole system of educational service delivery. The decree provided the conceptual and regulatory background of the creation of a unified system of national quality assurance.

These reforms were further institutionalized in the Presidential Resolution No. PQ-275 (September 8, 2025), creating the National Agency of Quality Assurance in Education of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The establishment of this agency will be a major move towards achieving centralization of external quality assurance activities and improving coordination within the higher education system.

Simultaneously, the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 498 (August 6, 2025) came into effect and proposed a system of complex and specialized state accreditation of higher, postgraduate, and professional education institutions. This reform is an indication of a change to more differentiated and performance-based evaluation mechanisms.

Also, the Order of the Director of the National Agency (Reg.). The accreditation of higher education institutions was determined by No. 3732, December 23, 2025) with specific criteria and performance indicators. These indicators operationalize the QA processes by the provision of measurable benchmarks regarding the assessment of the performance of the institutions with reference to education, research, and engagement with the society.

Due to these reforms, the national QA system consists of:

- Standards of quality of education;
- Formed guidelines on research and innovation performance;
- Systems of measuring the value of higher learning institutions to the socio-economic development of the regions;
- Combined monitoring, accreditation, and accountability systems.

The creation of the Quality Assurance Agency and the new regulatory framework also marks the move towards a centralized, transparent, and criteria-oriented system of



QA that makes Uzbekistan be closer to the international trends in the higher education governance.

Notably, these developments establish conducive platforms to harmonize the national QA practices with the ESG. In the context of the Erasmus+ CBHE QUARTZ project, this coordination offers a systematic foundation of enhancing institutional culture of quality, governance and equipping higher education institutions to facilitate the successful adoption of quality assurance procedures in future reform phases.

5. The Role of the QUARTZ Project (Erasmus+ CBHE)

The article is written in the context of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) programme, as part of the QUARTZ (Quality Assurance of Reform and Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Uzbekistan) project.. The project is one of major international projects that will help the modernization of higher education in Uzbekistan, and in particular, enhance the mechanisms of quality assurance.

The QUARTZ project is important in the development of the national and institutional QA capacities in many dimensions which are interrelated:

- Facilitating institutional capacity development, such as development of internal quality assurance mechanisms and governance system in higher institutions of learning;
- Publicizing the current QA practices, which are in line with global standards and emphasize on continuous improvement, as opposed to formal conformity;
- Ensuring knowledge transfer and best practice exchange by collaborating with universities in Europe;
- Enhancing the internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms, especially when it comes to curriculum design, student-centered learning, and performance evaluation.

One of the peculiarities of QUARTZ project is the focus on the adaptation, instead of direct adoption of international practices. This way, the QA models will not be laid out mechanically but instead they will be carefully adjusted to suit the national regulatory framework, institutional diversity, and socio-economic context in Uzbekistan.

Notably, the project is much related to the ESG. By doing so, QUARTZ will aid in the establishment of a consistent and internationally compatible QA framework, but at the same time, facilitate the introduction of recent national reforms, such as the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency in 2025.

The QUARTZ project also offers an organized platform to develop the culture of quality through European experience, and support the institutional governance, and equip institutions of higher learning to handle the successful implementation of QA processes in further stages of reforms.

6. Alignment with ESG (European Standards and Guidelines)

An important strategic direction in the reformation of the higher education of Uzbekistan is the fact that national quality assurance systems should be oriented to the



ESG. The ESG framework is an internationally accepted benchmark in creating coherent, transparent, and effective QA systems in a variety of higher education.

The ESG offers a very detailed and methodological approach to quality assurance, both internal and external. It sets forth articulate guidelines regarding student-centered learning, institutional accountability toward quality, and transparency, accountability, and steady enhancement as key principles of higher education governance.

Consistency and comparability of quality assurance practices, in the context of the existing reforms in Uzbekistan especially the creation of national Quality Assurance Agency and introduction of accreditation standards in 2025 in accordance with ESG principles provides a methodological basis to quality assurance practices.

Notably, the promulgation of ESG principles must not be perceived as a goal, but as an instrument of attaining more systemic goals. These include:

- Enhancing institutional governance and management practices;
- Promoting a quality culture that is sustainable and internally motivated in the institutions of higher learning;
- Increased internationalisation and credibility of Uzbek higher education diploma.

Simultaneously, successful ESG alignment needs a situational approach. The implementation at the national level should consider:

- The existing regulatory and legal framework;
- The variety of institutions of higher learning, both state and non state;
- The needs of the country in terms of socio-economic development and labor market.

In the context of the Erasmus+ CBHE QUARTZ project, the alignment of ESG is viewed as a process to localize and adapt, but not copy it. This makes the European best practices to be credibly incorporated in the national system without compromising institutional relevance and viability.

Finally, the correspondence to ESG offers a systematic framework that can be used to enhance the culture of quality, enhance governance, and equip higher education institutions in Uzbekistan with the ability to effectively introduce quality-assurance procedures in the next stages of the reform.

7. Discussion

The practice of the European higher education systems shows that effective quality assurance can not be implemented solely with the help of regulatory frameworks, but the internalization of quality principles in institutions of higher education. In that respect, building a sustainable quality culture in which quality responsibility is distributed at all levels of the institution is one of the success factors.

In the case of Uzbekistan, the current transformation of the system of higher education poses both great opportunities and complicated issues. Comparatively, the system of quality assurance in Uzbekistan is not the same as those of a number of neighbouring systems. An example is that accreditation agencies in Kazakhstan are



more institutionally independent, and in Uzbekistan, the QA model is more centralized. Although such centralization can lead to greater regulatory coherence, it can also restrict institutional flexibility and innovation in quality assurance practices.

As emphasized in earlier sections, the high rate of expansion in access, especially in terms of expansion of non-state institutions, has brought about risks pertaining to the unequal academic standards and institutional capacities. This is a key policy issue of ensuring that this growth does not affect the quality of education.

Meanwhile, the success of new reforms especially the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency in 2025 and the establishment of accreditation standards will be determined by how well national policies have been translated into institutional practices. It is important to fill the gap between the regulatory frameworks and everyday academic processes.

The Uzbekistan must face some challenges, including:

- Balancing the growth of higher education with a sustainable level of quality;
- Assuring internal institutional coherence between national QA reforms and internal institutional processes;
- Enhancing trust within the stakeholders (students, employers, and international partners) by being transparent and accountable.

Here, a specific combination of the national reforms and the international cooperation mechanisms, especially the Erasmus+ CBHE QUARTZ project provides a unique opportunity of changing the system. This process is further supported by the alignment with ESG principles that offers a systematized and internationally accepted system of quality assurance.

Finally, the effectiveness of QA reforms in Uzbekistan will not only rely on the effectiveness of regulatory institutions, but also on the capacity of higher education institutions to undertake the proactive and internally motivated response to quality improvement.

The need to have a dynamic balance between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms is a theme that has reoccurred in the international QA literature. Although external QA, i.e. via accreditation, audit, and external reviews, is a good way to secure accountability and transparency, it cannot replace the strong internal QA systems based on institutional ownership. In Uzbekistan, the introduction of a new agency (National Agency of Quality Assurance in Education) and mandatory state accreditation are particular fortifications of the external QA. Nevertheless, a danger of being overdependent on external mechanisms remains. When institutions view QA as a mere compliance exercise by regulatory authorities, there is the risk of a ritualistic conformity - whereby procedures are adhered to formally without any real engagement or commitment towards improvement.



As a measure to mitigate this risk, the QA framework in Uzbekistan needs to explicitly encourage internal QA capabilities development. This involves obligating institutions not only to meet external standards but also to have working mechanisms within themselves to monitor themselves, use feedback and to perpetually revise their curriculum. The international experience indicates that the external evaluation is the most effective one in the cases when it confirms and enhances internally motivated quality processes instead of replacing them. In the case of Uzbekistan it means that the National Agency must assume a developmental role, to provide guidance, capacity building assistance and good practice recognition alongside its regulatory capabilities. The focus of the QUARTZ project on improving the IQA systems is thus quite timely as it targets the internal directly.

Although the regulatory framework governing QA in Uzbekistan has made significant strides in the 2025 reforms, there is still an essential gap in policy-making and implementation by institutions. Quality culture, as described above as values, beliefs and practices that encourage a culture of continuous enhancement of quality, cannot be enforced by decree. Rather, it will be developed during a long-term commitment of leaders and the involvement of the faculty, as well as the acquisition of quality standards internally. The shift in attitude between compliance-based behavior and an intrinsic quality culture in most Uzbek higher education institutions is not an easy task due to a number of practical challenges especially in those institutions that have little previous involvement with systematic quality processes.

To begin with, academic staff can see QA activities as the new form of bureaucratization instead of the means of professional growth and better student achievement. Faculty resistance tends to compromise even well-developed QA policies unless they receive proper training, incentives and structures of participatory governance. Second, the institution leadership might not be strategic enough to implement national accreditation requirements into context-specific improvement strategies that will capture the institutional mission and disciplinary diversity. Third, the lack of a culture of data-driven decision making, such as a systematic gathering and analysis of student feedback, progress rates, and graduate employment rates prevent the possibility to find out what is wrong and quantify the effect of QA interventions.

To mitigate these implementation gaps, a multi-pronged approach is needed, including investing in the further professional growth of academic employees and administrators; promoting peer-learning networks across institutions; and gradually correlating QA results with institutional finances or performance incentives, avoiding perverse impacts. Here the role of QUARTZ project as a knowledge disseminator and adaptation of methodology is important in offering a platform where practices that are contextually suitable can be piloted and scaled. Finally, the effectiveness of QA transformation in Uzbekistan will be assessed not by the number of programs that have undergone accreditation, but by how far the quality will become a collective responsibility and a philosophical principle of daily academic activity.



8. Conclusion

Quality assurance is now a key reform agenda in the higher education in Uzbekistan. Although there has been a great improvement especially through the formation of a national Quality Assurance Agency, there are still major challenges in areas like admissions, teaching quality and student assessment practices.

The ESG integration with the Erasmus+ CBHE QUARTZ project will give a harmonized and internationally accepted framework of overcoming the challenges. This consistency and transparency of quality assurance processes not only increase the integrity and transparency of quality assurance but also facilitate the building of institutional capacity and governance.

In the future, the effectiveness of continued reforms will rely on the capacity to successfully translate regulatory modifications into institutional practice and to nurture a quality culture that is sustainable in institutions of higher education. In this respect, special focus must be made on enhancing internal quality assurance mechanisms, enhancing the involvement of stakeholders, and evidence-based decision-making.

In the end, access, quality and accountability will be necessary in a balanced approach to ensure that higher education plays a significant role in socio-economic development of the country in the long term and its competitiveness in the international market.

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