STATEMENT OF ACCREDITATION PHILOSOPHY

ATHEA: *The Association for Transnational Higher Education Accreditation*. A membership-based association governed by the ATHEA Board of Directors.

THEA: *Transnational Higher Education Accreditation*. The accreditation service provided by ATHEA and administered by the THEA Board of Commissioners.

Overview

The purpose of this document is to describe the THEA Board of Commissioners' accreditation philosophy. The accreditation philosophy is subsequently used to provide direction and specifics to all documents, processes, and actions taken by the organisation relative to its accreditation programme. The accreditation philosophy provides the foundation by which subsequent activities arise.

The following Statement of Accreditation Philosophy includes several essential elements including:

1. ATHEA's Organizational Purpose

2. ATHEA's Mission, Vision, and Values

3. ATHEA's Accreditation Beliefs

4. A Discussion of the THEA Standards and Expectations for Accreditation including:

   a. Accreditation Standards and Expectations for Academic Institutions

   b. Accreditation Process Standards and Expectations

   c. Organizational Quality Assurance Standards and Expectations

Collectively, the aforementioned areas represent the Statement of Accreditation Philosophy for the Association for Transnational Higher Education Accreditation (ATHEA). The intent of each section, as well as the specifics described within each section, give meaning, purpose, and direction to subsequent action.

Organizational Purpose

The ATHEA is a non-profit organisation to promote the following activities:

(a) To provide educational, accrediting, quality assurance and other services to its member institutions, degree/diploma granting post-secondary educational institutions offering higher education and located inside or outside the European area, including, but not limited to, the countries who are signatories of the Bologna Protocols.

(b) To serve as an accrediting agency that is included on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education. As such, the ATHEA will conduct voluntary, non-governmental peer review and make decisions concerning the accreditation or pre-accreditation status of member institutions.

(c) To promote quality assurance and improvement through voluntary accreditation via peer evaluation and instil public confidence in its institutional members' missions, goals, performance, and resources through its rigorous accreditation standards and their enforcement.

(d) To initiate and sustain such training and research activities as may be consistent with the general purposes of ATHEA.

Mission, Vision, and Core Values

MISSION

The Association for Transnational Higher Education Accreditation (ATHEA) is a voluntary, non-governmental, membership association that is dedicated to quality assurance and improvement through accreditation via peer evaluation. Accreditation by Board of Commissioners instils public confidence in the institutional mission, goals, performance, and resources through its rigorous accreditation standards and their enforcement of those standards. ATHEA standards for accreditation are based on the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) required for recognition by the European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education (EQAR).

VISION

The Association for Transnational Higher Education Accreditation (ATHEA) aspires to be the preeminent resource for institutions of higher education striving to achieve excellence in fulfilling their missions. ATHEA intends, through voluntary assessment and adherence to high standards for student learning outcomes and operational behaviour, to

assure higher education's publics that its accredited institutions are fulfilling their stated purposes and addressing the publics' expectations.

CORE VALUES

The Association for Transnational Higher Education Accreditation (ATHEA) is guided by these Core Values:

> ➢ Voluntary membership
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> ➢ Self-regulation and peer-review
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> ➢ A continuous and seamless relationship with member institutions to promote continuous self-evaluation and institutional improvement
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> ➢ Respect for the unique mission of each institution and evaluation within that context
>
> ➢ Student learning and effective teaching
>
> ➢ Transparency about the accreditation processes and the status held by each member institution
>
> ➢ Commitment to the principles of cooperation, flexibility, and openness
>
> ➢ Responsiveness to the needs of the higher education community and societal changes
>
> ➢ Consideration of societal and institutional needs through attention to and emphasis on both improvement and compliance
>
> ➢ Responsiveness to a diverse, dynamic, global higher education community that is continually evolving

ATHEA's Accreditation Beliefs

ATHEA believes that accreditation must be mission-based, strategic planning driven, outcomes and competency centred, and based upon peer-review. Accreditation signifies that an institution has a purpose appropriate to higher education and has resources, programmes, and services sufficient to accomplish and sustain that purpose. Accreditation indicates that an institution maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees it offers, and that it is successful in achieving its stated objectives.

Self-regulation through accreditation embodies a philosophy that a free people can and ought to govern themselves through a representative, flexible, and responsive system. Accordingly, accreditation is best accomplished through a voluntary association of educational institutions. Accreditation enhances educational quality throughout the region by improving the effectiveness of institutions and ensuring that institutions meet standards established by the higher education community, and serves as a common denominator of shared values and practices among the diverse institutions.

Both a process and a product, accreditation relies on integrity, thoughtful and principled judgment, rigorous application of requirements, and a context of trust. It provides an assessment of an institution's effectiveness in the fulfilment of its mission, its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association, and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programmes and services. Based upon reasoned judgment, the process stimulates evaluation and improvement, while providing a means of continuing accountability to constituents and the public. An intended outcome of accreditation is that the process leads to continuous enhance and development of the institution and serves as a mechanism of continuous improvement.

The product of accreditation is a public statement of an institution's continuing capacity to provide effective programmes and services based on agreed-upon requirements. The statement of an institution's accreditation status is also an affirmation of that institution's continuing commitment to the principles and philosophy of accreditation.

Accreditation supports the right of an institution to pursue its established educational mission; the right of faculty members to teach, investigate, and publish freely; and the right of students to access opportunities for learning and for the open exchange of ideas. However, the exercise of these rights should not interfere with the overriding obligation of an institution to offer its students a sound education.

The ATHEA would adhere to the following fundamental characteristics of accreditation:

- Participation in the accreditation process is voluntary and is an earned and renewable status.

- Member institutions develop, amend, and approve accreditation requirements through an open and transparent governance concept.

- The process of accreditation is representative, responsive, and appropriate to the types of institutions accredited.

- Accreditation is self-regulation.

- Accreditation requires institutional commitment and engagement.

- Accreditation is based upon a peer review process.

- Accreditation requires an institutional commitment to student learning and achievement.

- Accreditation acknowledges an institution's prerogative to articulate its mission within the recognized context of higher education and its responsibility to show that it is accomplishing its mission.

- Accreditation expects an institution to develop a balanced governing structure designed to promote institutional autonomy and flexibility of operation.

- Accreditation expects an institution to ensure that its programmes are complemented by support structures and resources that allow for the total growth and development of its students.

A Discussion of the Standards and Expectations for Accreditation

The Standards and Expectations for Accreditation are adopted from the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as approved by the Ministerial Conference in May 2015. By adopting the ESG standards for the ATHEA, the intent is that the ATHEA should be eligible to become recognized by European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

Part 1 of the Standards are those areas by which the academic institution will be evaluated by the ATHEA through the candidacy and accreditation processes. The standards form the basis of accreditation and used to develop the accreditation processes used by the ATHEA.

Part II of the Standards relates to how the ATHEA will conduct the process of accreditation. These processes relate to the procedures, expectations, and actions needed to confirm written submissions by the member institute.

Part III of the Standards relates to how the ATHEA will be evaluated for consideration to the EQAR Register. The standards determine the governance and administration of the ATHEA.

The purpose of identifying all three sets of standards is so that the academic institution applying for membership that will potentially lead to candidacy and accreditation with the ATHEA has a clear understanding of not only the accreditation standards by which the institution will be evaluated, but also the processes by which the ATHEA will conduct accreditation along with the evaluation construct that will be applied to the ATHEA relative to EQAR recognition.

Part 1: Standards and Expectations for Candidacy and Accreditation. These are the standards by which the academic institution will be evaluated by the THEA Board of Commissioners, hereafter referred to the ***THEA Accreditation Standards and Expectations for Academic Institutions***.

1.1. **Strategy for Quality Assurance**. The institution has a strategy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of the institution's strategic management. Internal stakeholders develop and implement this strategy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders. This strategy should be included in the institutions strategic planning process. All transnational activities of the institution including joint programmes, partnership arrangements, branch campuses, etc. should also be included within the strategy for quality assurance.

Expectations

Strategies, policies, and processes are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system that forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the accountability of the institution. Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture within the institution in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution. In order to facilitate this, the strategy has a formal status and the policy is publicly available.

Quality assurance strategies and policies are most effective when they reflect the relationship between research and learning and teaching and take account of both the national or regional context in which the institution operates, the institutional context, and its strategic approach. Such a policy supports the organisation of the quality assurance system. Quality assurance strategies guide departments, schools, faculties and other organizational units as well as those of institutional leadership, individual staff members and students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance. Quality assurance strategies allow for academic integrity and freedom and are vigilant against academic fraud. Quality assurance strategies guard against intolerance of any kind and guard against discrimination against the students or staff. Quality assurance strategies and policies also include the involvement of external stakeholders in quality assurance.

The quality assurance strategy translates into practice through a variety of internal quality assurance processes that allow participation across the institution. How the strategy is implemented, monitored, and revised is the institution's decision. The

quality assurance policy also covers any elements of an institution's activities that are subcontracted to or carried out by other parties. The strategy should be included of the institution's strategic planning process.

1.2. **Design and Approval of Academic Programmes**. The institution has processes for the design and approval of their academic programmes. The programmes are designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme is clearly specified and communicated, and referred to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Expectations

Academic programmes are at the core of the tertiary education institutions' teaching mission. Academic programmes provide students with both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable, which may influence their personal development, and may be applied in their future careers.

Academic programmes should be designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes. Academic programmes are designed by involving students and other stakeholders in the work and should benefit from external expertise and reference points. Academic programmes reflect the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe (cf. Scope and Concepts) and designed so that they enable smooth student progression. Academic programmes define the expected student workload, e.g. in ECTS, and include well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate. Placements include traineeships, internships and other periods of the programme that are not spent in the institution but that allow the student to gain experience in an area related to their studies. Academic programmes must be subject to a formal institutional approval process.

1.3. **Student-Centred Learning, Teaching, and Assessment.** The institution's academic programs are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process and the assessment of student learning reflects this approach.

Expectations

Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. This means

careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes.

Student-centred learning and teaching respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths and considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate. Student-centred learning and teaching has flexibly and uses a variety of pedagogical methods that regularly evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods. Student-centred learning and teaching encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher that promotes mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship. Student-centred learning and teaching also has appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints.

Considering the importance of assessment for the students' progression and their future careers, quality assurance processes for assessment take into account that Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field. Quality assurance processes for assessment include the criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance. The assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process. Where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner. The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances. Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students, and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures. A formal procedure for student appeals is in place relative to the assessment processes.

1.4. **Student Admission, Progression, Recognition, and Certification.** The institution consistently applies pre-defined and published regulations and policies covering all phases of the student cycle including student admission, progression, recognition, and certification.

Expectations

Providing conditions and support that are necessary for students to make progress in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions, and systems. It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition, and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.

It is important that access policies, admission processes, and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. Induction to the institution and the programme is provided. Institutions need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression.

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and in cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies, and the national ENIC/NARIC center with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country or region.

Graduation represents the culmination of the students' period of study. Students need to receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.

1.5. **Teaching Staff**. The institution assures themselves of the competence of their teachers, including appropriate qualification to teach the assigned workload. The institution applies fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the teaching staff. The institution performs research appropriate to the institution's mission.

Expectations

The teacher's role is essential in creating a high quality student experience and enabling the acquisition of knowledge, competences, and skills. The diversifying student population and stronger focus on learning outcomes require student-centred learning and teaching and the role of the teacher is, therefore, also changing.

Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively. Such an environment sets up and follows clear, transparent and fair processes for staff recruitment and conditions of employment that recognize the importance of teaching. The teaching environment must offer opportunities for and promotes the professional development of teaching staff. The teaching environment should encourage scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research and encourage innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies.

1.6. **Learning Resources and Student Support**. The institution has appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and provides adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support.

Expectations

For a good higher education experience, institutions provide a range of resources to assist student learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries, study facilities, and IT infrastructure to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors and other advisers. The role of support services is of particular importance in facilitating the mobility of students within and across higher education systems.

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

Support activities and facilities may be organized in a variety of ways depending on the institutional context; however, the internal quality assurance ensures that all resources are fit for purpose, accessible, and that students are informed about the services available to them. In delivering support services, the role of support and administrative staff is crucial and therefore they need to be qualified and have opportunities to develop their competences.

1.7. **Information Management.** The institution collects, analyses, and uses relevant information for the effective management of their academic programmes and other institutional activities with appropriate policies and procedures to facilitate clear communication with all stakeholders.

Expectations

Reliable data are crucial for informed decision-making and for knowing what is working well and what needs attention. Effective processes to collect and analyse information about study programme and other activities feed into the internal quality assurance system.

The information gathered depends, to some extent, on the type and mission of the institution. Areas of interest relative to information data management include key performance indicators; profiles of the student population; student progression,

success and dropout rates; students' satisfaction with their programme; learning resources and student support available; and career paths of graduates.

Various methods of collecting information may be used. It is important that students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.

1.8. **Public Information.** The institution publishes information about its activities, including academic programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date, and readily accessible. The institution also publishes information regarding its ethical standards and conduct, community engagement activities, and social responsibilities.

Expectations

Information on the institution's activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public. Therefore, institutions must provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer, and the selection criteria for them, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, and the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students as well as graduate employment information. The institution also publishes information regarding its ethical standards and conduct, community engagement activities, and social responsibilities.

1.9. **On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes.** The institution monitors and periodically reviews their programmes to ensure that the programmes achieve the objectives set for them and are responsive to the needs of students and society. Periodic reviews lead to continuous improvement of the academic programme. Actions planned or taken as a result of the periodic reviews are communicated to all those concerned. A periodic review is also completed on the comprehensive quality assurance plan.

Expectations

Regular monitoring, review, and revision of study programmes aim to ensure that the provision remains appropriate and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students. Monitoring and periodic review includes the evaluation of the content of the programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline thus ensuring that the programme is up to date. Monitoring and periodic review also includes evaluation of the changing needs of society, the students' workload, progression, and programme completion. Monitoring and period review includes

evaluation regarding the effectiveness of procedures for assessment of students, the student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme. Monitoring and period review includes the evaluation of the learning environment and support services and their fitness for purpose for the programme.

Programmes are reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders. The information collected is analysed and the programme is adapted to ensure that it is up-to-date. Revised programme specifications are published. The programme review includes a comprehensive quality assurance plan review.

1.10. **Cyclical External Quality Assurance.** The institution undergoes external quality assurance in line with the ATHEA Standards and Expectations on a cyclical basis.

Expectations

External quality assurance in its various forms can verify the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance, act as a catalyst for improvement, and offer the institution new perspectives. It will also provide information to assure the institution and the public of the quality of the institution's activities.

Institutions participate in cyclical external quality assurance that takes account, where relevant, the requirements of the legislative framework in which they operate. Therefore, depending on the framework, this external quality assurance may take different forms and focus at different organizational levels (such as programme, faculty, or institution).

Quality assurance is a continuous process that does not end with the external feedback or report or its follow-up process within the institution. Therefore, institutions ensure that the progress made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one.

Part 2: Standards and Expectations for External Quality Assurance. These are the standards and expectations that the THEA Board of Commissioners will use when conducting its accreditation processes, hereafter referred to as the ***THEA Accreditation Process Standards and Expectations***.

2.1. **Consideration of Internal Quality Assurance.** ATHEA's quality assurance addresses the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance strategies and processes as described in Part 1, ***AHEA Accreditation Standards for Academic Institutions***.

Expectations

Quality assurance in higher education is based on the institutions' responsibility for the quality of their programme and other provision; therefore, it is important that the accreditation examiners recognize and support the institutional responsibility for quality assurance. To ensure the link between internal and external quality assurance, external quality assurance includes consideration of the standards of Part 1. These may be addressed differently, depending on the type of external quality assurance.

2.2. **Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose.** ATHEA's quality assurance is defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders are involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Expectations

In order to ensure effectiveness and objectivity, it is vital for the THEA Board of Commissioners' external quality assurance to have clear aims agreed to by all stakeholders. The aims, objectives and implementation of the processes will consider the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions and take into account the need to support institutions to improve quality. ATHEA's quality assurance processes will allow institutions to demonstrate this improvement and result in clear information on the outcomes and the follow-up.

The system for external quality assurance might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance.

2.3. **Implementing Processes.** The THEA Board of Commissioners' external quality assurance processes are reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently, and published. The THEA Board of Commissioners' external quality assurance processes

include a self-evaluation, a site visit, a report resulting from the external assessment, and consistent follow-up.

Expectations

External quality assurance that is carried out professionally, consistently, and transparently ensures its acceptance and impact by the member institutions. The institution provides the basis for most of the external quality assurance through a self-assessment and by collecting other material including supporting evidence. The written documentation will be complemented by interviews with stakeholders during a site visit. The findings of the assessment will be summarized in a site visit report written by a group of external experts known as the site visit team.

External quality assurance does not end with the report by the site visit team. The report provides clear guidance for institutional action. The THEA Board of Commissioners will have a consistent follow-up process for considering the actions taken by the institution. The nature of the follow-up will depend on the site visit and accreditation processes.

2.4. **Peer-review Experts.** A group of external experts that include at least one student member conducts the external quality assurance.

Expectations

At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of ATHEA through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students, and employers/professional practitioners. In order to ensure the value and consistency of the work of the experts, the peer-review team will be carefully selected through a formal criteria-based process, have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task, and are supported by appropriate training and briefing. ATHEA ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism of no-conflict-of-interest. The involvement of international experts in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes.

2.5. **Criteria for Outcomes**. Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance are based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

Expectations

External quality assurance, and in particular its outcomes, has a significant impact on institutions and programmes that are evaluated and judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, outcomes of external quality assurance are based on pre-defined and published criteria, which are interpreted consistently and are evidence-based. Depending on the external quality assurance system, outcomes may take different forms. For example, the outcomes include recommendations, judgements, and formal decisions.

2.6. **Reporting**. Full reports by the peer-review experts are published, clear, and accessible to the academic community, external partners, and other interested individuals. If the THEA Board of Commissioners takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision will be published together with the report.

Expectations

The report by the peer-review experts is the basis for the institution's follow-up action of the external evaluation and it provides information to society regarding the activities of an institution. In order for the report to be used as the basis for action to be taken, the report needs to be clear and concise in its structure and language and to cover such areas as institutional context and a description of the individual procedures, including experts involved. The site visit report will include evidence, analysis, findings, conclusions, features of good practice demonstrated by the institution, and recommendations for follow-up action. The institutional will be afforded the opportunity to review the report before it is finalized in order to ensure factual accuracy.

2.7. **Complaints and Appeals.** Complaints and appeals processes are clearly defined as part of the design of The THEA Board of Commissioners' assurance processes and is communicated to the institutions.

Expectations

In order to safeguard the rights of the institutions and ensure fair decision-making, the THEA Board of Commissioners' external quality assurance will be operated in an open and accountable way. Nevertheless, there may be misapprehensions or instances of dissatisfaction about the process or formal outcomes. Institutions will have access to processes that allow them to raise issues of concern with the ATHEA. ATHEA will handle such issues in a professional way by means of a clearly defined process that is consistently applied.

The THEA Board of Commissioners' complaints procedure allows an institution to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out.

In an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcomes of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, that criteria have not been correctly applied or that the processes have not been consistently implemented.

Part 3: Standards and Guidelines for Agencies. These are the standards that will be used to evaluate ATHEA relative to consideration for the EQAR Register, hereafter referred to as the *ATHEA Organizational Quality Assurance Standards and Expectations*.

3.1. **Activities, Policy, and Processes for Quality Assurance**. ATHEA will undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. ATHEA will have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These goals and objectives will translate into the daily work of the agency. ATHEA will ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

Expectations

To ensure the meaningfulness of external quality assurance, it is important that institutions and the public trusts the ATHEA and its processes related to accreditation. Therefore, the goals and objectives of the quality assurance activities are described and published along with the nature of interaction between the ATHEA and relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the scope of ATHEA's work. The expertise in the ATHEA may be increased by including international members in agency committees.

A variety of external quality assurance activities are carried out by the ATHEA to achieve different objectives. Among them are evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities at the institutional level that may be carried out differently. When the ATHEA also carries out other activities, a clear distinction between external quality assurance and other fields of work will be needed.

3.2. **Official Status**. ATHEA has an established legal basis and will be formally recognized as a quality assurance agency by EQAR.

Expectations

In particular, when external quality assurance is carried out for regulatory purposes, institutions need to have the security that the outcomes of this process are accepted within their higher education system, by the state, the stakeholders, and the public.

3.3. **Independence**. ATHEA will be independent and act autonomously. ATHEA will have full responsibility for its operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

Expectations

Autonomous institutions need independent agencies as counterparts. In considering the independence of the ATHEA, several areas are important. Organizational independence, demonstrated by official documentation (e.g. instruments of government, legislative acts or statutes of the organisation) that stipulates the independence of the ATHEA's work from third parties, such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organisations.

Operational independence, the definition and operation of the agency's procedures and methods as well as the nomination and appointment of external experts, are undertaken independently from third parties such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholders.

ATHEA will maintain independence of formal outcomes. While experts from relevant stakeholder backgrounds, particularly students, take part in quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the ATHEA.

Anyone contributing to external quality assurance activities of the ATHEA (e.g. as peer-review expert) is informed that while they may be nominated by a third party, they are acting in a personal capacity and not representing their constituent organisations when working for the ATHEA. Independence is important to ensure that any procedures and decisions are based solely on expertise.

3.4. **Thematic Analysis**. ATHEA will regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of its external quality assurance activities.

Expectations

In the course of its work, the ATHEA gains information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system. These findings can

contribute to the reflection on and the improvement of quality assurance policies and processes in institutional, national, and international contexts. A thorough and careful analysis of this information will show developments, trends, and areas of good practice or persistent difficulty.

3.5. **Resources**. ATHEA will have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out its work.

Expectations

It is in the public interest that the ATHEA is adequately and appropriately funded, given higher education's important impact on the development of societies and individuals. The resources of the ATHEA enables it to organize and run its external quality assurance activities in an effective and efficient manner. Furthermore, the resources enable the ATHEA to improve, to reflect on their practice, and to inform the public about their activities.

3.6. **Internal Quality Assurance and Professional Conduct**. ATHEA will have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of its activities.

Expectations

The ATHEA will be accountable to its stakeholders. Therefore, high professional standards and integrity in the ATHEA's work are indispensable. The review and improvement of the ATHEA activities are on-going so as to ensure that their services to institutions and society are optimal.

The ATHEA applies an internal quality assurance policy that is available on the ATHEA website. This policy ensures that all persons involved in its activities are competent and act professionally and ethically and includes internal and external feedback mechanisms that lead to a continuous improvement within the ATHEA. The policy guards against intolerance of any kind or discrimination, outlines the appropriate communication with the relevant authorities of those jurisdictions where they operate, and ensures that any activities carried out and material produced by subcontractors are in line with the ESG, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance activities are subcontracted to other parties. The policy also allows the ATHEA to establish the status and recognition of the institutions with which it conducts external quality assurance.

3.7.**Cyclical External Review of the ATHEA**. ATHEA will undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate its compliance with its standards. ATHEA will conduct an informal review with other similar agencies for review of its standards and practices as a benchmark every 2 to 3 years.

Expectations

A external reviewer will help ATHEA reflect on its policies, practices, and activities. The periodic external review provides a means for assuring ATHEA and its stakeholders that it continues to adhere to the principles enshrined in the ESG.