"Improving Governance in the Tunisian Higher Education System: Towards University Autonomy and New Mechanisms of Quality Assurance"

Proposal of a Methodology for the Implementation of Quality Assurance in the WP4 Tunisian Universities

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Methodology for the Implementation of Quality Assurance

1. What methodology should be adopted to create a system of Quality Assurance that is adapted to the requirements and needs of Tunisian universities and their stakeholders, and capable of evolving towards a Quality Management System (QMS)?

The transition from a traditional higher education and scientific research system, based on reputation and presumed quality, to one which provides for a genuine QA process, must take into account the baseline situation (the actual state of things) as well as the cultural and political tradition of the concerned country.

Like all other advanced university systems, the Tunisian university system is very complex. Indeed, its university components are characterized by significant structural differences (number of students, teachers, staff, faculties and/or departments or schools), themselves comprising various poles of excellence.

This diversity requires different efforts, methods, timetables and deadlines to run effective Quality Assurance systems.

The evolution of QA systems should be conducted gradually with a view to allowing each university to harmonize practices in educational and scientific activities, to guarantee the respect of commitments to interested parties, particularly in terms of quality, and to optimize administrative operations. The aim is to attain levels of harmonized and shared service, with the possibility of developing existing systems towards excellence.

1. The first step consists of making all universities aware of the fundamental QA principles and providing them with mechanisms for their appropriation.

2. The second step is to define a roadmap, as well as to endorse the creation of a national agency in accordance with European and African standards (European Standard and Guidelines ESG, African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ASG- QA) for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and for Harmonization of African Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Accreditation" (HAQAA). This Agency would be in charge of evaluating and complying with the common requirements and the requirements specific to each institution according to the national, regional and local strategic guidelines.

3. The third stage involves the commitment of the universities to comply with the indications dictated by the Quality Assurance Agency.

4. The fourth step is that of closing the project and moving to a recurrent functioning consisting of the initial evaluation of each university.

1. What are the Objectives of the Quality Assurance System?

The objectives of the approach are part of the strategy of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, which aims at international recognition of universities and their institutions. Besides, the QA system aims to build confidence in the Ministry and the potential funders. Accountability and improvement are at the heart of all activities within universities, and can be achieved by providing useful information and recommendations to enhance performance.

It should be added that the quality assurance approach must take into account the expectations of all stakeholders in an exhaustive manner, namely:

- The supervisory ministry
- Institutions
- Students
- Teaching, administrative and worker staff
- Student families
- Businesses
- Local and regional authorities
- Civil Society
- Partner and competing universities
- Donors: EU, World Bank,…
- Other ministries
- Sectoral committees
- Elected bodies in universities and institutions
- Mediation centers

This list does not claim to be exhaustive, as it is to be completed, if necessary, according to the specificities of each university.

For each stakeholder, needs and expectations and the way to take them into account in the quality assurance system should be defined.

The European ESG and African ASG-QA references and guidelines highlight the fact that higher education has several objectives beyond its purely academic role. In addition to the transmission of advanced disciplinary knowledge and skills, higher education must achieve other important objectives such as:

- Preparing students for active citizenship and their future professional careers (for example, promoting their employability);

- Supporting their personal development;

- Stimulating research, innovation and commitment to the community.

The quality of training and citizenship education, which should be provided by each university, is the result of the interaction between students, teachers and the administrative and technical system (staff and structures) that supports them, particularly the possibility for teachers to encourage learning in the most effective way possible.

The quality assurance system should comply with the requirements of African and European standards (Appendix, Table1).

Other important requirements that are not in these repositories should be taken into account, for example: the consideration of risks and opportunities as well as change management.

2. *A New Internal and External System of Quality Assurance*

To implement a QA system for Tunisian universities, it is necessary to rethink the entire internal and external QA system.

A single external quality assurance agency should be defined by merging the National Authority for Assessment, Quality Assurance and Accreditation (IAEQA) and the National Committee for the Evaluation of Scientific Research Activities (CNEAR), following the Italian model (ANVUR). The agency should ideally be independent, but it should be initially under the aegis of the Ministry. The organization chart would initially be as follows:
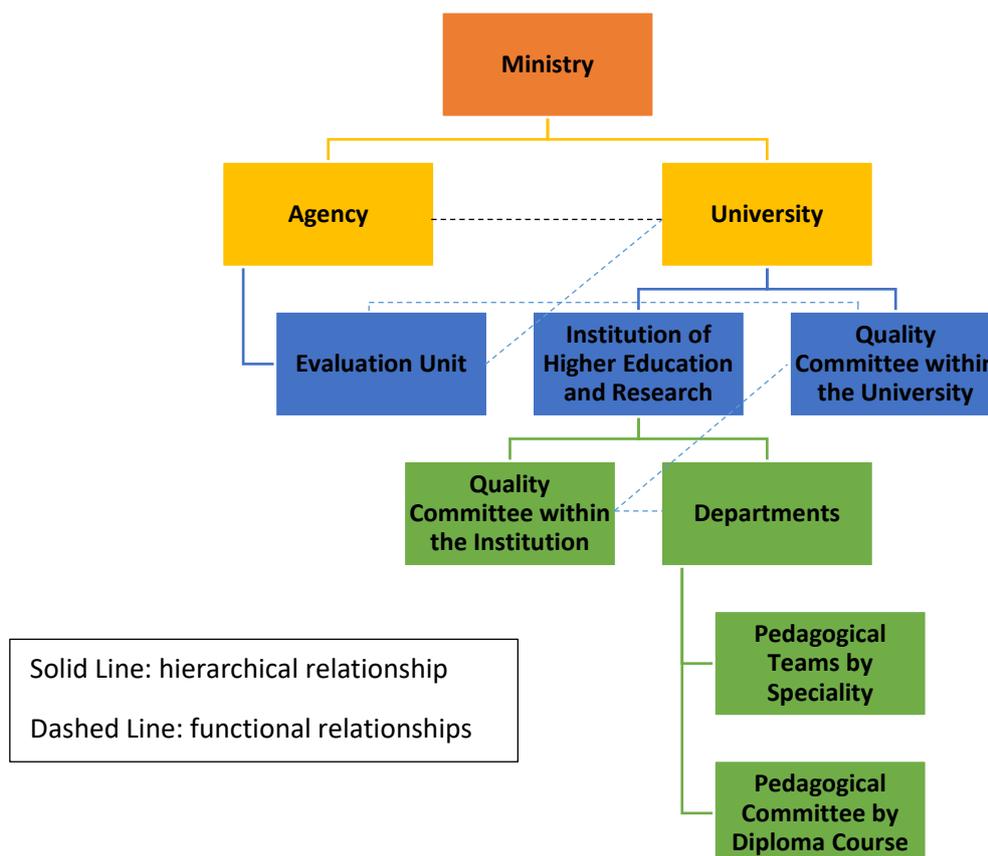
2.1. Roles et Functions of the Quality Committees

Quality committees are established in accordance with Law No. 2008-19 of February 25, 2008 on Higher Education.

The Quality Committee is a university authority tasked with the following functions:

- Assisting the governing bodies and the presidency in proposing an institutional quality policy and to oversee its implementation.

- Advising on the choice of indicators, ensure the collection, monitoring and analysis of data, and bring the results to the knowledge of governance, as a basis for decision-making.

- Providing guidance for the proper execution of quality assurance procedures within the University, based on directives from governing bodies, in addition to supervising their implementation.

- Launching useful initiatives to promote the quality of education.

- Making the university community aware of issues relating to quality and institutional accreditation, and seek to generate a collective commitment in favor of the continuous improvement of the quality of the institution.

- Listening to the needs of stakeholders and analyzing them.

- Ensuring document management

- Regularly monitoring the progress of the action plan.

2.2. Role of Quality Committees in Evaluation

Self-assessment is a crucial phase and precedes the external assessment. This process will have as output/deliverable a self-evaluation report which will be an essential part in the external evaluation process.

The Quality Committee will be responsible for:

- Planning and implementing the entire internal and external evaluation process.

- Ensuring the flow of information with the agency.

- Initiating the opening and closing sessions of the evaluation process, and ensuring the exchange of information and documentation.

- Monitoring the implementation of the follow-up process following accreditation visits.

- Preparing all activities, documents and logistics for the accreditation visit.

- Gathering feedback and recommendations from those who are involved, in order to improve the process once the assessment is complete.

2.3. Composition of the Quality Committee

The Quality Committee will be composed of university lecturer-researchers and internal staff with skills and experience in Quality Assurance and evaluation, as well as representatives of the students and of the socio-economic environment. These members jointly meet the needs of external and internal Quality Assurance.

3. Documents of the QA System

Within the University, the QA system will be described through specific planning documents (Strategic Plan and Descriptive Documents of Quality Policies).

These documents must be accessible to internal and external stakeholders, contain clearly defined and achievable objectives, take into account the socio-cultural context, the scientific development potential of the University, the ministerial program and the necessary and available resources. These documents must be in line with the university's processes; those who are responsible for them must be identified (in terms of drafting, management, approval, etc.)

The main documented information according to ASG-QA is summarized in Appendix 1, Table 2.

4. Organization within the University

For the QA system to function properly, the university must have a transversal organization for the implementation of its strategic plan, QA management and continuous improvement. The organization must be based on a clear definition and distribution of tasks, actors, responsibilities and powers, in addition to providing for regular communication flows between the governing bodies (university governance) and the structures responsible for education and research, without forgetting the strategic role of students, who must actively participate in the activities of the institution.

To achieve this, the following must be considered:

- Internal periodic monitoring and evaluation of the functioning of the QA system.

- Planning activities aimed at reviewing tasks, roles and responsibilities within the framework of QA to assess their relevance and effectiveness. These activities will be organized through coordination between the Evaluation Committee, the Quality Committee, and the departments, faculties or schools.

- Teachers, technical administrative staff and students are required to transmit their observations on the functioning of the system and to propose improvements to the governing bodies and structures responsible for QA. To this end, a documented process of collection and analysis of observations and suggestions for improvement will be put in place. The results will have to be shared.

- Each university should broaden the modalities of listening to students and their participation, so that they can contribute to the decisions of the governing bodies and have an active and participatory role in QA processes at all levels. This must be reflected, in particular, in a mechanism allowing their representatives to be elected.

> **Here should be a paragraph describing the respective roles and powers of the University Presidency (central management) and the institutional components in QA matters. For clarity, this paragraph could contain a functional flowchart.**

To have an effective QA system, the university should adopt adequate processes of:

- Planning,

- Deployment in components,

- Update and revision of the Study Programs,

- Meeting the needs of students and other interested parties,

- Development of the offer and implementation of programs.

5.   *The Characteristics, Tasks, Roles and Powers of a New External QA Agency*

A new national agency should meet international standards/international parameters of accreditation agencies, by fulfilling two criteria:

1. Harmony with the Tunisian national academic tradition

2. Compliance with international standards (cf. ESG / ASG-QA indications) for agency quality assurance.

N.B: This agency must be autonomous, in particular vis-à-vis the ministry.

In order to do this, it is essential that the ministry help define the tasks, roles, responsibilities and powers of the agency, by providing support in the first 24 months to the administration staff, the personnel and the expert teachers. This should lead to the establishment of a national agency tasked with:

- Evaluating the quality of the processes, results and products of management, training, research and technology transfer activities within universities and research organizations.

- Defining the criteria and methodologies for evaluating structures and courses, including doctoral research schools, for periodic accreditation.

- Evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of public funding and incentive programs for teaching, research and innovation activities.

The results of the evaluations and their cross-sectional analysis should allow the ministry to:

- Develop and propose the quantitative and qualitative requirements for the creation, merger, federation or abolition of universities.

- Propose new assessment activities to the agency, and define standard parameters.

Areas of reflection to be carried out with the ministry may include the following questions:

- Are the agency's assessments binding (mandatory assessments?)

- Do they lead to consequences (closure of a training or institution), or is it only an evaluation, then the ministry takes over.

- Does the agency finance itself (including its staff) and if so, how?

- Who is responsible for the evaluations?

- Does the agency take care of the assessment, certification or accreditation?

Further Details

Universities and study programs are subject to initial and periodic accreditations, which take place in accordance with criteria and procedures defined by the AQ Agency.

The QA Agency defines the accreditation indicators for study programs, evaluates them and communicates the results to the ministry.

The indicators, developed in accordance with the standards and guidelines established by the ESG or ASG-QA, take into account the objectives that each university has devised during a given period of time. This period can be agreed upon with the Agency itself.

The Agency informs the Ministry and grants or denies accreditation of universities and programs leading to the issuance of a diploma.

Final Note

This document is only a first draft which generally defines the principles of a QA system.

The tasks of each body, the actions and the whole accreditation process can be defined in a specific way through additional and more complete documents.

Appendix 1

Table 1 : Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the African vs the European Area

African Standards and Guidelines (ASG)	European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)
1. Vision, Mission and Strategic Objectives	1.1 Policy for Quality Assurance
2. Governance and Management	
3. Human Resources	1.5 Teaching Staff
4. Management of Financial Resources	
5. Infrastructure and Facilities	
6. Recruitment, Admission and Certification of Students and Student Support Services,	1.4 Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification 1.6 Learning Resources and Student Support
7. Design, Approval, Monitoring and Review of Programs	1.2 Program Design and approval 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic Review of programs
8. Teaching, Learning and Assessment	1.3 Student-centered Learning, Teaching and Assessment
9. Research and Innovation	
10. Community Engagement	
11. Information Management	1.7 Information Management
12. Public Communication	1.8 Public Information
13. Collaboration, Staff and Student Mobility	1.4 and 1.6

Table 2 : ASG-QA Chapters and Documented Information

Chapters	Documented Information
Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance	
Vision, Mission and Strategic Objectives	• The vision, mission and strategic objectives are publicly disclosed; they reflect the aspirations and needs of stakeholders. • The formulation of the plans is collegial (Strategic, academic, financial, research). • The institutional plans reflect the programs being offered, as well as its research focus. • There is continuous and periodic monitoring, evaluation and benchmarking of processes ○ Self-assessment of academic and research programs, as well as institutional and governance self-assessment
Governance and Management	• Relevant governance and management bodies, such as the University Council, Senate, Management Board, Student Body; and various committees, each with a clear mandate, duties, responsibilities, powers, privileges and tenure; • QA policy and structure; • Clear communication systems and networks for the promotion of internal and external information dissemination • Policies and procedures for the delegation of authority; • Participation of students in decision-making in relevant governance bodies; • Regular consultations with stakeholders; • Impartial and objective qualitative and quantitative information about courses offered, research undertaken and community services; • Effective processes for deterring, detecting and dealing with misconduct by students or staff (Charter); • Policies and activated procedures to manage conflict of interest • Processes for the investigation of complaints, grievances and appeals by students, staff and other stakeholders.
Human Resources	• Policies and procedures that ensure equal opportunities and actual gender equality in human resources for recruitment, retention, and promotion of staff; • Up-to-date records of staff numbers, qualifications and employment turnover rates; • Policies and procedures for continuous staff development; • Contractual agreements with staff that outline the conditions of employment and are aligned with any legislative requirements of the country of the institution; • Periodic monitoring, evaluation, and appraisal of staff; • Student-faculty ratios; • Resumé of sessional stakeholders (minimum).
Financial Resource Management	• Policies and procedures for budgeting, resource allocation, repairs and maintenance of infrastructure, asset management, debt management and financial reporting;

	• A system to address and analyze the risks, gaps and challenges identified for continuous improvement; • Monitoring, evaluation through financial audits.
Infrastructure and Facilities	• Compliance document for the academic, administrative and recreational facilities / control minutes / periodic checking of equipment and facilities (lecture theatres, seminar rooms, staff offices, laboratories, studios, workshops, library, computer equipment, high speed connectivity, facilities that conform to appropriate national health and safety provisions, facilities accessible for persons with disabilities, etc.) adequate for the number of students and staff; • Report on the library activities (organization, equipment, physical or online resources); • Resources to develop the knowledge and skills of the ICT practitioners. • ICT plan (maintaining and upgrading of technologies, and ensuring reliability, privacy, safety and security). In the case of E-learning: • Clearly stated technical expectations; • Server space, redundancy or load balancing; • Technical help desk; • Reliable technical services in terms of back-up and remote services; • A system for Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), which should be assessed and feedback given to students; • Structure for communicating changes in software programs or hardware; • A training program/process for both staff and students when new software or a new system is adopted; • Learning policy on new software.
Student Recruitment, Admission, Certification and Support Services	• Policy and procedures for recruitment/admission (that promote diversity, including gender mainstreaming and consideration of disadvantaged groups and persons with disabilities) and selection, registration, information and certification of students; • Students admitted must meet minimum general and program-specific entry requirements; • Evaluation of enrolment management; • Continual collection and compilation of data on students' admission, progress and performance, and graduation rates; • National and institution-specific indicators (dropout rate, number of adults resuming studies, number of part-time students; number of international students, number of workers; number of students with specific needs); • Processes for issuance and storage of certificates; • Storage of detailed records and transcripts, indicating the list of courses, units and grades; • Learning resources; • Planning studies.

Design, Approval, Monitoring and Evaluation of Study Programs	- Policy and processes for the design, approval, monitoring and evaluation of Study Programs; - Mechanisms for stakeholder participation in curriculum design, review and validation; - Feedback from students, alumni and employers (surveys); - Training programs that are in accord with international norms and approved by the relevant national QAA; - Procedures/Processes/Policy for introducing new programs; - Internal and external program evaluation reports; - Procedure for the approval of programs; - Matrix of academic programs / Teachers' qualification; - Formal agreements for all programs offered in partnership with other institutions; - Formulation of learning outcomes are benchmarked against level descriptors of national or regional Qualifications Frameworks, and information to all stakeholders; - In the case of ODL, the pre-testing of learning materials
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	- The teaching, learning and assessment strategies are student-centered; - Assessment and evaluation of the teaching and learning approaches; - Mechanisms for students to provide feedback on their learning experience; - Student assessment procedures: - Assessment methods, - Invigilation procedures, - Monitoring of student progress, - Recording of assessment results, - Recording of settling of disputes; - Procedures ensuring the integrity of examinations; - Disciplinary and appeals process for students who may feel aggrieved; - Assessment standards for each program; - Assessment is carried out by competent and impartial examiners; - QA handbook, known to staff and students.
Research and Innovation	- Institutional research policy; - Standards, procedures and processes for the approval of research proposals, and theses, and the conduct and supervision of research studies; - Policies, research management systems and strategies that facilitate all staff to undertake innovative research, and publish research results; - Standards and processes for the approval of research proposals and theses; - Standards and processes for the management of research partnerships and research contracts; - Standards and processes for handling intellectual property; - Standards and processes for the commercialization of research, and effective and trustworthy management of research information; - Adequate academic integrity; - Appropriate research committees and boards to ensure academic integrity;

	• Effective monitoring and evaluation of the research system.
Community Engagement	• Mechanisms to enrich scholarship activities; • Mechanisms for partnering with other stakeholders in the community for sustainable development; • Policy for the university social responsibility (USR)?
Information Management	• Mechanism for information management; • Processes for collecting and analyzing information about academic programs; • Research programs and activities of the institution; • Key performance indicators (Dashboard); • Satisfaction of students and alumni with programs and teaching provided; • Profile of student population; • Pedagogical resources.

Public Communication	• The publications (internal and external) include:
	   o Academic programs
	   o Selection criteria
	   o Learning outcome
	   o Awarded qualifications
	   o Pedagogical practices
	   o Graduation rates
	   o Career opportunities
	   o Fees
	• Schedule for training, examinations, submission of assignments, and collection of certificates.

Collaboration, Staff and Student Mobility	• Policies that promote the mobility of academic staff, researchers and students; • Collaborating programs (among higher education institutions); • Quality audits for the institutions; • Approval of the collaborating institutions by the relevant QAA/ professional body; • If the program is offered via collaborative arrangements, the provider clearly defines the rights and responsibilities of parties, legal ownership, accreditation status of the program, and resources available for the program.