

INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION PROGRAMME

SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

May 2023

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PART I – Background

1. Introduction

EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is a quality assurance agency that was first confirmed as operating in compliance with the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) on the basis of an external review report finalised in 2009, thus achieving listing in EQAR and confirming its membership of ENQA. The status has since been renewed twice, in 2014 and in 2019. In line with the new policy by ENQA and EQAR on targeted reviews for agencies that have been registered in EQAR for at least two consecutive terms, and that are up to date with their substantial change reports, EUA-IEP has decided to opt for a targeted review. This means that the process covers the following ESG standards: ESG 2.1 (compulsory for all agencies), ESG 2.3 and ESG 3.3 (considered by the EQAR Register Committee as partially compliant in 2019), and the self-selected standard for enhancement: ESG 3.1. IEP has requested ENQA to coordinate this targeted review.

This self-assessment report represents the result of IEP's self-assessment process focusing on the listed standards and following the guide of content provided by ENQA. It is submitted to ENQA as the basis for the external review taking place in 2023. The aim of the report is to explain how IEP has addressed compliance with standards 2.3 and 3.3 since the previous review, how it continues to meet the requirements of ESG 2.1, and to address its deliberation and expectations on support regarding enhancement in the areas covered by ESG 3.1. A SWOT analysis is a central part of the report as it provides a substantial basis for the section on ESG 3.1. It is presented in Part III of this self-assessment report.

2. Development of the self-assessment report (SAR)

The self-assessment process was launched in November 2022, with the establishment of a self-assessment group (SAG), appointed by the IEP Steering Committee. The group consisted of members of the IEP pool of experts, its Steering Committee, and the director of the IEP secretariat. In putting together the group, attention was paid to reflect the diversity of the IEP pool, including gender, geography, experience in IEP, and role within the IEP expert pool. The members of the group were:

- Simona Lache, Vice-Rector for University Internationalisation and Quality Evaluation, Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania, IEP regular team member and member of IEP Steering Committee;
- Jürgen Kohler, Former Rector, Greifswald University, Germany, IEP team chair and member of IEP Steering Committee;
- Gregory Clark, former Associate Secretary, Quality Assurance Unit, University of Salford United Kingdom, and IEP team coordinator;
- Ana Gvritshvili, student, member of the Georgian Student Organizations Association, and IEP student team member;
- Maria Kelo, Director, IEP secretariat.

Cecilia Biaggi from the IEP Secretariat acted as secretary for the group.

While the concrete work of developing the SAR was carried out by the SAG, other groups and stakeholders contributed to the self-assessment process. The main steps of this process were:

- The IEP Secretariat and Steering Committee set up the SAG in November 2022;
- The SAG met two times in 2023: 20 January (first SWOT analysis), and 4 May to discuss the first draft of the self-assessment report and provide feedback to the secretariat. The SAG also communicated further via email throughout the self-assessment process;
- Members of the IEP Steering Committee conducted a second SWOT analysis during their spring meeting on 20 March 2023;
- The SAG met again on 4 May to comment on and discussed remaining points of the SAR;
- IEP Steering Committee commented on and approved of the SAR in an email consultation between 26 May and 2 June;
- The final version of the SAR was sent to the ENQA secretariat on 9 June 2023 and published on the IEP website on the same date.

During the self-assessment process, IEP also examined formal and informal feedback from the IEP pool of experts and evaluated institutions. Due to the strategic nature of the elective standard 3.1, the SAR has focused on reflections on IEP in the changing world of quality assurance, including emerging challenges for external quality assurance posed by new forms of international cooperation, and the changing role of national quality assurance agencies.

3. IEP approach to external QA and changes since last review

3.1 IEP and its methodology

IEP is a European quality assurance agency, active primarily across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), but also beyond. As a result, IEP does not operate within any single specific higher education system, however as an EQAR registered agency, it operates in compliance with the ESG (regardless of whether the evaluation takes place within or outside the EHEA). IEP uses a methodology that has proven to be transferable and context sensitive. The 24 evaluations conducted outside the EHEA are testament to this.¹

IEP's evaluation teams are European, composed of peers from EHEA countries, but not of the country in which the institution to be evaluated is situated. In order to ensure that the team has sufficient information about the higher education framework in which the institution operates, institutions are

¹ See E. Cirlan, (2022), [Are the European standards for quality assurance relevant for institutions outside the European Higher Education Area?](#).

requested to provide contextual information in their self-evaluation report, and where possible, the IEP secretariat supplies relevant country background information to the evaluation team. A 2016 paper by IEP² reflected on this issue and concluded that IEP teams are able to accurately capture system level features, despite not being from the country in question. Also, when possible, a panel member speaks the language of the institution under evaluation.

In order to ensure legitimacy, IEP only evaluates institutions that are formally recognised within their own national system.

As a pan-European quality assurance agency, IEP functions independently from any national regulations. Institutions take part in IEP on a voluntary basis and evaluations do not lead to any judgement or decision, but in a number of recommendations in key areas of institutional activity, which are designed to support the institution's strategic development.

Since its foundation in 1994, IEP has conducted 456 evaluations in 50 different countries, 427 of which have been within the EHEA³. Since the last external review, IEP has conducted 26 evaluations (19 initials and 7 follow-up), of which 23 have been within the EHEA⁴. Further statistics on the evaluations carried out by IEP can be found in Annex 10.

IEP offers institutional evaluations with the following core characteristics:

- A context driven evaluation that takes the institutional mission and goals as its starting point.
- An improvement-oriented evaluation that identifies good practice and provides recommendations for improvement, but does not lead to a summative decision, accreditation, comparison, or ranking.
- A comprehensive evaluation covering all areas of institutional activity, including governance and decision-making, learning and teaching, research, quality culture, service to society and internationalisation.
- Emphasis on an inclusive self-evaluation phase in order to deepen institutional self-knowledge and help identify areas of focus for the evaluation visit.
- A peer review with a European perspective by an experienced evaluation team that represents the diversity of European higher education and takes into account the latest developments in the sector.

Within the framework of the standard IEP methodology, in 2016 IEP introduced the option of evaluations with a special focus. Currently two areas of focus are available: internationalisation, and management of research and use of research results. The focus is approached within the context of a

² G. Dakovic & T. Loukkola, (2016), *The relevance of international peers and experts in capturing the national higher education context in institutional evaluations* (available [here](#)).

³ The number includes all the completed evaluations and five evaluations started in 2022 that will be finalised by autumn 2023.

⁴ Evaluations finalised from 2019 onwards and including the five evaluations still ongoing (see note 3).

full and comprehensive institutional evaluation, but is given extra attention throughout the evaluation processes, with more in-depth analysis and recommendations. Evaluation teams are composed bearing in mind the need for expertise in the chosen area of focus.

Between one and three years after the initial evaluation, institutions have the option to register for a **follow-up evaluation**. The aim of a follow-up evaluation is to identify the impact of the initial evaluation, explore the changes that have taken place in the intervening period, and provide further impetus for change and improvement. Wherever possible, the evaluation team will consist of a mix of new members and members who conducted the initial evaluation in order to provide both continuity and fresh perspectives.

In addition to these individual evaluations (also referred to as 'regular evaluations'), IEP offers **coordinated evaluations**, in which all or some institutions in a particular country or system are evaluated. As a result of a coordinated exercise, each institution receives its own individual evaluation report and, if requested, IEP provides a sector report that highlights shared issues and challenges and facilitates a dialogue among key stakeholders, including governments. Since the last external review, IEP has not carried out any coordinated evaluations. One key reason was the COVID-crisis, which made travel and engagement in large scale review operations more difficult, and the war in Ukraine, which put a planned coordinated evaluation in the country to a halt.

As IEP is not rooted in any particular national higher education system, all of its activities can be considered as 'cross-border'. The evaluation principles and methodology remain the same, regardless of the country in which IEP is operating, including any evaluations outside of the EHEA.

As part of its comprehensive approach, IEP evaluates all areas of an institution's activity. IEP takes the institution's mission overall, and goals in each area as the starting point, and examines whether these are appropriate and whether the policies and processes in place are fit-for-purpose. To do so, IEP uses the following key questions, which follow a Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle:

- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

It is understood that all of these questions are accompanied by the question "why", so that in addition to the exploration of status quo, there is also a strategically oriented validation process.

The questions are explored in the following areas of institutional activity:

- Governance and institutional decision-making;
- Quality culture;
- Teaching and learning;
- Research;
- Service to society;
- Internationalisation.

To support institutions in reflecting on these questions in each area of institutional activity, IEP provides a set of *Guiding questions for the self-evaluation process* (part of the *Guidelines for Institutions*, available [here](#)). These questions also cover the topics of the ESG Part 1 (see page 9).

Evaluations are carried out by teams of experts drawn from the IEP pool, which currently has about 50 members. Each evaluation team consists of five people: a team chair, two regular team members, a student team member and a team coordinator⁵.

- Team chairs: current or former rectors who have demonstrated their abilities by serving as regular team members in previous IEP evaluations;
- Regular team members: current or former rectors or vice-rectors;
- Team coordinators: higher education professionals with experience in the areas of governance, teaching and learning, quality assurance, or research in higher education;
- Student team members: undergraduate or graduate students, with experience in quality assurance and university governance, nominated to the IEP pool by the European Students' Union (ESU).

Evaluation teams are composed taking into account the balance of gender, geography, nationality, discipline and experience in IEP evaluations, as well as any specific area of focus requested by the institution.

The pool of experts is managed according to the *Guidelines for managing the IEP pool* (Annex 2), which outline criteria and procedures for recruiting and training pool members.

3.2 Changes for the implementation of the site visit since last external review

One of the distinctive features of IEP until the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic was that evaluation teams conducted two site visits to the institution. After conducting all visits online between 2020 and 2021, the Steering Committee introduced some changes to the IEP process for the 2021-22 evaluation round in accordance with the results of a survey among IEP pool members and discussions at the 2021 September Annual Seminar. In the new evaluation process, a set of online meetings replaces in part the first site visit, and the time for the site visit increased from three to four days to ensure a comprehensive coverage of all topics and interviewee groups. The advantages of the new process are a reduction in the IEP's carbon footprint, a reduction in the cost of the IEP evaluation to the university (no accommodation, local travel, and meals for the first site visit), and a reduction in international travel cost for IEP. The first informal feedback shows that the new structure of the site visit works well, and is able to maintain the key features and coverage of the IEP methodology. IEP will carry out an

⁵ For institutions with fewer than 3500 students, and for all follow-up evaluations, the team consists of four people, with one regular team member instead of two.

analysis of the success of the new approach after the first round of reviews following this methodology will be completed (winter 2023-2024).

3.3 Key documents

IEP has a set of policies that define its governance and operational aspects. These include:

- Governance of IEP: Roles and Responsibilities (i.e., IEP Terms of Reference) (Annex 1)
- Internal quality procedures (available [here](#))
- Charter of conduct for IEP pool members (available [here](#))
- IEP Complaints and Appeals Criteria and Procedure (available [here](#))
- Guidelines for managing the IEP pool (Annex 2)
- Guidelines for institutions (available [here](#))⁶, teams (Annex 4) and the secretariat (Annex 3)

PART II – Focus areas for compliance

4. Part 3 of the ESG

4.1. ESG Standard 3.3 - Independence

Standard: Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

IEP operates autonomously on all levels and is independent from national authorities, institutions and other stakeholders. This applies also and in particular to IEP's relationship vis-a-vis EUA.

In terms of **organisational independence**, although EUA is the legal body of IEP, IEP is governed independently by its Steering Committee, which is composed of a subset of members of the IEP pool. The mandate of the Steering Committee is specified in the document *Governance of IEP: Roles and Responsibilities* (Annex 1), which was most recently updated and approved by the Steering Committee in March 2023.

There is no link between EUA membership and IEP evaluations, except that EUA members benefit from a reduced registration fee. Evaluations are open to all legitimate higher education institutions, and the outcomes of IEP evaluations are not used in assessing EUA membership applications or

⁶ These are the guidelines for initial evaluations. Guidelines for other types of evaluations are also available on the IEP website: www.iep-gaa.org/how-iep-works.html

suitability for involvement in any EUA activities. IEP provides its annual report for information to the EUA Board, but does not seek its formal approval. The IEP Steering Committee alone has the task of approving work plans and annual reports of IEP, and is in charge of the development of the methodology.

While the independence of IEP is firmly secured in its policy documents⁷, it has sought (in accordance to the recommendations provided by the review panel in 2018) to ensure an individual corporate identity, to better communicate its autonomy towards stakeholders. IEP has a new website⁸, hosted entirely separately from the EUA website, and uses a visual branding that is clearly distinct from the EUA corporate image.

In terms of **operational independence**, with regards to the evaluations, the respective roles and responsibilities of IEP, the evaluation team and the institution are laid out in a contract signed between IEP and the institution (and, where applicable, a commissioning body) before the start of the evaluation process. The evaluation itself is carried out entirely independently by the appointed evaluation team. While the Secretariat reviews all reports to ensure their consistency and quality, the findings and recommendations are the sole responsibility of the evaluation teams. The chair of the evaluation team signs off the final report and also has the final say if there is disagreement within the team, or if the secretariat proposes any (editorial) changes. The final draft of the report is sent to the institution for a factual check before it is finalised, however no possibility is given for influencing the team's findings. In cases where the evaluation is commissioned by a third party (for example, a national authority), independence is also safeguarded in that the commissioning body will not have the opportunity to read the individual evaluation reports before they are published.

Each member of the evaluation team is part of the IEP pool of experts and is bound by the *Charter of conduct for pool members* (available [here](#), and also included in the *Guidelines for Teams, Annex 4*). The charter sets out the expectations towards pool members with regards to professionalism and the avoidance of any conflict of interest, real or perceived.

The day-to-day activities of IEP are managed by the IEP Secretariat, who work for IEP on a part-time basis, spending the rest of their time on EUA activities. Although staff are shared between IEP and EUA, they clearly differentiate between their work for the two bodies. The time spent on EUA and IEP activities is clearly and regularly reported in the EUA time management system and is part of the individual job descriptions. The annual work plan includes an approximate indication of the percentage of FTE for each IEP Secretariat staff member to be spent on IEP activities. The IEP Secretariat has also separate team meetings from the meetings of the Institutional Development Unit of EUA, which hosts the Secretariat of the IEP.

IEP has a shared services approach to make use of EUA's physical and technical infrastructure, as well as expertise from support staff in the areas of finance and communication. This arrangement allows for efficient use of resources and reduces costs for IEP, and by consequence also for institutions

⁷ I.e., IEP Terms of Reference, IEP strategic priorities 2020 – 2025.

⁸ www.iep-qaq.org

registering for an evaluation. Within EUA's IT infrastructure, all documents and records related to IEP are stored in a section of the server that has restricted access only for staff that are part of the IEP Secretariat. While the director of IEP is appointed by the EUA, the IEP Director has responsibility for the selection and supervision of the rest of the IEP secretariat staff. The Director organises the monthly team meetings and carries out the annual appraisals of the IEP secretariat staff. In addition, the Director is accountable to the IEP Steering Committee in tasks pertaining to the IEP secretariat, and gets guidance from the same body.

Being connected to EUA for staff and support services offers an important benefit to IEP. IEP's evaluations and thus income vary significantly from year to year with a high degree of unpredictability in terms of evaluation volume. The fact that staff have contracts with EUA means that the IEP is able to maintain its professional and trained staff through years with lesser demand for evaluations, which would not be possible if IEP had directly recruited staff. In terms of financial and staff arrangements, the relationship between IEP and EUA is not dissimilar to the relationship between many national QA agencies and their respective national ministries or funding authorities.

In terms of formal outcomes of the review processes, these consist of the final report of the review panel composed of independent peer reviewers selected by IEP. There is no impact on the formal outcome by any third party, or the evaluated institution, which can only indicate factual errors in the report. EUA bodies have no role in the approval or publication of the formal outcomes of the process.

PART III – Focus areas for compliance

5. Part 2 of the ESG

5.1 ESG Standard 2.1 - Consideration of internal quality assurance

Standard: External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

The ENQA agency review 2019 found IEP fully compliant with standard 2.1. Since then, IEP has not undergone major changes in its structure, activities and methodology. IEP continues to offer comprehensive, enhancement-led institutional evaluations, and as part of this an institution's internal quality assurance system is reviewed and its effectiveness is examined through the use of IEP's four key questions⁹. IEP places high emphasis on the institutional responsibility for quality assurance and on the need to foster quality culture. In order to ensure that institutions address the standards of the ESG part 1, the IEP [Guidelines for Institutions](#) recommend that a chapter of the self-evaluation report prepared by evaluated institutions is dedicated specifically to institutional quality culture. Furthermore, all aspects of the evaluated institution's quality assurance system are also covered in a holistic way in the self-evaluation report throughout the chapters on other areas of institutional

⁹ See p. 6.

activity. The Guidelines for Institutions provide guiding questions for the self-evaluation report that cover all standards of the ESG part 1. Finally, all the standards of the ESG part 1 are also included in the template used by IEP evaluation teams for preparing their final evaluation report¹⁰. The table below outlines the coverage of the ESG Part 1 in the IEP guiding questions for institutions (part of the IEP Guidelines for Institutions) and the IEP report template for evaluation teams (part of the *Handbook for writing IEP evaluation reports*):

Standard	Guiding questions for the self-evaluation process as outlined in the IEP Guidelines for institutions	Points to be addressed by evaluation teams in their report as outlined in the Handbook for writing IEP evaluation reports
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	What does the institutional quality assurance policy consist of?	Chapter 3: Quality culture. Quality assurance policies for all aspects of institutional activity (cf. ESG 1.1, also ESG 1.9)
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	How does study programme design and approval function in the institution? Who does what?	Chapter 4: Teaching and learning. Design and approval of study programmes (cf. ESG 1.2)
1.3 Student-centred learning teaching and assessment	How and to what extent does the institution implement a student centred approach implemented to teaching and learning?	Chapter 4: Teaching and learning. Approaches to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment (cf. ESG 1.3)
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	What are the policies and processes covering the various phases of the student life-cycle?	Chapter 4: Teaching and learning. Policies and processes for all phases of the student life-cycle (cf. ESG 1.4)
1.5 Teaching staff	How does the institution ensure the competences of its staff? What kind of staff development structures and processes are in place?	Chapter 2: Governance and institutional decision-making. Issues related to funding and human resources, including staff recruitment and development (cf. ESG 1.5) Chapter 4: Teaching and learning. Support for teaching staff (cf. ESG 1.5)
1.6 Learning resources and student support	Is the organisation and content of student support services adequate to meet the goals set? How effective are student support services in enhancing the achievement of students?	Chapter 4: Teaching and learning. Student support services and resources (cf. 1.6)

¹⁰ *Handbook for writing IEP evaluation reports* (Annex 5).

1.7 Information management	The question “How does the institution know it works?” refers to the internal monitoring processes and practices (sometimes also referred to as institutional research activities) in place in the institution and the information collected feeds into the strategic management of the institution	Chapter 3: Quality culture. Collection and use of information (cf. ESG 1.7)
1.8 Public information	How does the institution communicate information about its activities to its internal and external stakeholders?	Chapter 2: Governance and decision-making: Communication of information about institutional activities to the internal and external stakeholders (cf. ESG 1.8) Chapter 4: Teaching and learning. Availability of information (cf. ESG 1.8)
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	What are the tools used to monitor and evaluate the institution’s different activities? Specifically related to teaching and learning mission: how are programmes monitored and reviewed?	Chapter 3: Quality culture. Quality assurance policies for all aspects of institutional activity (cf. ESG 1.1, also ESG 1.9) Chapter 4: Teaching and learning. Monitoring and review of study programmes (cf. ESG 1.9)
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	<i>Institutions are asked to include information about their status with regards to external quality assurance requirements in the ‘Institutional Context’ section of the self-evaluation report.</i>	Chapter 3: Quality culture. External quality assurance of the institution (cf. ESG 1.10)

The philosophy of IEP has always centred on an enhancement-oriented process that considers the institution’s own mission and strategy as the starting point for the evaluation. The IEP methodology is considered to be fit-for-purpose and highly beneficial to evaluated institutions. Not only does the IEP process address in an enhancement-oriented manner the internal quality assurance of the institution being reviewed, but it also examines internal quality assurance policies and methods within the wider context of institutional strategic management, thus adopting a truly holistic approach to the evaluation. The SWOT analysis too indicated the methodology of IEP as one of its key strengths, contributing to reinforce the belief that no major changes are needed. IEP wishes to use the outcomes of this current external evaluation to support the future development of its approach and methods.

5.2 ESG Standard 2.3 - Implementing processes

Standard: External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include a self-assessment or equivalent; an external assessment normally including a site visit; a report resulting from the external assessment; a consistent follow-up.

As explained at 3.1, the Institutional Evaluation Programme offers different types of evaluations. All IEP evaluations are implemented through the following steps of the evaluation process:

- **Registration and preparation:** an institution commits to an evaluation by submitting an evaluation form and signing a contract. IEP verifies that the institution is authentic by checking that it is recognised by the relevant authority within its own system. The IEP secretariat conducts a video conference with representatives of the institution to ensure a common understanding of the aims and expectations, explain the evaluation process in detail, and answer any questions.
- **Self-evaluation:** the institution conducts a self-evaluation process, resulting in a self-evaluation report. The report serves as the first point of reference for the evaluation team.
- **Online meetings and site visit:** the evaluation team has two-day online meetings and makes a site visit to the institution (four days)¹¹. For follow-up evaluations, the evaluation team conducts only the four-day visit¹². At the end of the site visit, the evaluation team delivers an oral report, presenting its key findings and recommendations.
- **Evaluation (written) report:** the evaluation team prepares the evaluation (written) report, which elaborates on the key findings and recommendations. The report is edited for language and checked by the IEP secretariat to ensure that it meets the required standards of quality and consistency. The institution has an opportunity to check the report for factual errors before it is finalised, formally sent to the institution, and published on the IEP website.
- **Follow-up:** institutions are requested to participate in a follow-up video conference with the IEP secretariat around three months after the end of the evaluation in order to discuss their experience and provide feedback on the process. Institutions are also requested to send a progress report to IEP one year after the completion of the evaluation that is examined by the evaluation team in order to provide feedback on the implementation of the recommendations. Institutions also have the option to register for a follow-up evaluation between one and three years after the completion of the initial evaluation.

¹¹ In case the institution is very small, the visit may be shortened to three days. In case the institution is very large, it may be extended to five days. Any changes must be agreed in advance between the institution and the evaluation team.

¹² In case the institution is very large, the follow-up visit may be extended to five days upon agreement in advance between the institution and the evaluation team.

The evaluation process differs slightly between initial and follow-up evaluations since in the latter case there aren't online meetings. This is the only difference between initial and follow-up evaluations. In the case of coordinated evaluations, the process remains the same. Feedback from pool members and evaluated institutions has indicated that the process functions well and is fit-for-purpose.¹³

Full details of the evaluation process are laid out in the *Guidelines for Institutions*, which are publicly available on the IEP website. Furthermore, every institution undergoing an IEP evaluation is invited to an individual online video conference with the secretariat before starting the self-evaluation phase. As many people as necessary from the institution can attend the video conference, which provides an opportunity for more in-depth discussions on matters specific to the institution, and allows the secretariat to better understand the institution's motivations for and expectations on the evaluation. Any relevant information gained by the secretariat is communicated to the evaluation team to help them prepare for the site visits. Examples of such information might include updates relating to changes in leadership or other relevant personnel at the institution; details of other ongoing external quality assurance procedures or internal strategic planning exercises; practical considerations such as multiple campuses to be visited or need for interpretation during site visits. Finally, the process, roles and obligations of each party are also clearly set out in the contract signed by IEP and the institution at the start of an evaluation. Any specificities, such as for example an adapted timeline, are agreed in advance and must remain in line with the core principles of the Programme.

During the online meetings, which last two days, the team meets the institutional leadership and key staff, students and external stakeholders and gains a general understanding of the institution and its operating context. At the end of the online meetings, the team may request additional information or documentation from the institution. The site visit lasts four days, during which the team follows up in more detail on issues identified in the online meetings. The programme for the online meetings is proposed by the institution, while the programme for the site visit is proposed by the team. In both cases adjustments can be proposed by either side to ensure that the programme meets the needs of both parties.

At the end of the site visit, the evaluation team gives an oral report of their key findings and recommendations. The report is presented first to the rector alone in order to ensure there are no significant factual errors and to provide clarifications privately. It is then presented to the wider institutional community, with invitations to this presentation left to the discretion of the institution. IEP considers this immediate feedback to be important to sustain the motivation for the evaluation, provide an immediate impetus for change, and ease the concern of the institution by avoiding a long wait for the results of the evaluation. IEP acknowledges the pressure this places on teams to develop the findings and recommendations in a short period at the end of the site visit, but it ensures that details are not forgotten and allows the team to gauge the reaction of the institution during the oral presentation, which may indicate which aspects need further explanation or contextualisation in the evaluation (written) report. It should also be noted that teams have several moments of reflection

¹³ The feedback mentioned here is collected through post-evaluation surveys for team members, post-evaluation surveys for evaluated institutions and follow-up video conferences.

before, during and between both the online meetings and the site visit meetings in order to develop interim findings.

The written evaluation report is an elaborated version of the oral report, with further details of the evidence on which the findings and recommendations are based. The institution has the opportunity to check the report for factual errors, after which it is finalised, sent to the institution and published on the IEP website.

IEP attaches great importance to the follow-up phase, but in line with the voluntary nature of the evaluation, puts the emphasis on the institutional responsibility to reflect and act upon the findings and recommendations of the evaluation report. Since 2012, institutions are required to submit a short progress report one year after the completion of the evaluation. The progress report is expected to contain information on how the institution has addressed the recommendations made in the evaluation report. The purpose of the progress report is to facilitate the institution in reflecting on the changes made and areas where there is still room for improvement. IEP also uses the progress report to gain a better understanding of the usefulness and impact of the evaluation. When received, progress reports are sent to the original evaluation team, who prepare a brief response. This response is then incorporated into a letter from the chair of the Steering Committee to the institution. In order to encourage institutions to actively engage in the follow-up phase, the contract signed by IEP and by the institution states that the latter shall “submit to IEP a progress report one year after the evaluation is completed”. Since the last external review, 40% of evaluated institutions submitted their progress report,¹⁴ whereas between 2013 (evaluated institutions started to be required to send a progress report from 2012) and 2018, only around 13% of institutions submitted their progress report. Despite these good results, the secretariat has recently taken further steps to improve the support to the institution, and implemented changes to stress the importance of the follow-up (this was done according to the recommendations provided by the panel that reviewed IEP in 2018). Implemented changes include:

- an individual follow-up video conference held three months after the end of the evaluation between the secretariat and the evaluated institution in order to gain feedback and discuss what steps the institution is taking to implement (or not) the recommendations received (this was done according to the recommendations provided by the panel that reviewed IEP in 2018);
- every year, the secretariat contacts the evaluated institutions that are due to submit their progress report to remind them of this commitment;
- a new evaluation timeline that, unlike the previous one, includes the follow-up video conference and progress report with exact dates for each one of them has been designed and uploaded on the IEP website;

¹⁴ The data refers to institutions whose evaluation was completed between 2018 and 2021 and were required to submit their progress report between 2019 and 2022.

- the new *Guidelines for Institutions* contain a specific section explaining the details of the follow-up activities (i.e., follow-up video conference, progress report, possibility for institutions evaluated the first time to apply for a follow-up evaluation within three years).

Furthermore, IEP actively promotes the possibility of a follow-up evaluation to evaluated institutions between one and three years after their initial evaluation. This promotion consists of targeted email reminders sent each year during the registration period to evaluated institutions that qualify for a follow-up evaluation. Since the last external review, around 27% of regular evaluations (excluding evaluations under coordinated exercises) were follow-up evaluations. Since IEP's establishment, around 16% of all regular evaluations have been follow-up evaluations.

To further encourage the follow-up and highlight the importance of the full evaluation cycle, in 2015 IEP started to offer a 'combined package' that allows institutions to commit to undergo a follow-up evaluation at the time of registering for an initial evaluation.

For coordinated evaluations, an additional follow-up element is the post-evaluation workshop. This option is offered to commissioning bodies as an opportunity for stakeholders including the national authorities and the institutions to discuss the overall findings of the evaluations and to launch the discussions regarding follow-up at the system level. IEP is now considering also a systematic follow-up webinar for institutions evaluated within the previous year, to share experiences on the review impact and its follow-up in the institutional context. IEP hopes to implement this activity from the 2023-2024 evaluation round onwards.

PART III – Enhancement area and SWOT

6.1 ESG Standard 3.1 - Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

Standard: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

The IEP Steering Committee and Secretariat have decided to select ESG standard 3.1 as the elective enhancement-oriented standard for this process.

The main reason for the choice is that IEP is soon embarking on the revision of its strategic plan and considers the external review a good opportunity to get external feedback on its mission and activities. This has become particularly important in view of the changing QA panorama in Europe, with more and more agencies offering enhancement-oriented reviews at the institutional level, and engaging in cross-border quality assurance, making it necessary for the IEP to consider and ensure that its specificity and added value is clear and clearly understood by the (potential) users of the programme.

IEP would also like to increase the number of evaluations each year and eventually to widen the geographical scope of its activities. In addition, the reviews of European University Alliances, discussed at the last two IEP SC meetings, may provide opportunities for widening of scope.

In particular, the IEP wishes to address the following key questions:

- To what extent and through which kind of processes could and should IEP involve a larger set of stakeholders in shaping the design of IEP? Which stakeholders and at which levels (European or national) could bring added value to the process?
- How is its mission and objectives translated into the activities of IEP, and specifically, its review model?
- What approaches could IEP adopt in a new context of more agencies offering institutional level evaluation and/or enhancement focused QA?
- How better to communicate IEP's uniqueness in its mission and objectives to the HE sector in Europe (and beyond)?

6.1.1 Involvement of stakeholders in IEP

The IEP was set-up as a true peer-review process, where institutional leadership (current or former rectors and vice-rectors) supports institutional leadership in the reviewed institutions. Subsequently, the participation of students was guaranteed both in the IEP Steering Committee (with a member nominated by the European Students' Union) and in all IEP review panels. The team coordinators, who are also full panel members, are senior professionals with quality assurance backgrounds and thus bring a quality assurance and quality management perspective into the review process. As a collective stakeholder body of European higher education institutions, the EUA is regularly informed of the activities of IEP and is invited to provide feedback and advice on the development of IEP's activities. In the past, this structure has worked well, and the very high "peer element" has been much appreciated by reviewed institutions and their leadership in particular. However, IEP's steering committee and panel do not include representatives of employers, or – naturally for its context – of national authorities or what could be identified as "policy makers". The IEP is focused on strategic management of institutions and the related internal QA mechanisms. As IEP does not evaluate study programmes, it has been thus far considered that the added value of the involvement of employers is not very clear. In addition, not operating in a national context, the "who" and "what" of an employer representative are big questions, and when the IEP Steering Committee reflected on this topic in its meeting in March 2023 it came to the preliminary conclusion that it would not for the moment explore this option further, but would wait for feedback from the external review panel.

In terms of policymakers, EUA does not have a natural stakeholder due to its specific nature. While different national authorities are naturally included into the review process interviews of specific institutions, there is no representative engaged in the steering committee or in other formal manner in the operation of the IEP. IEP does not respond to a specific national policy framework, and thus it

is also not clear who and what kind of entity could and should take this role. One option would be to give this role to the EUA considering the financial and HR connection, another could be to integrate a representative of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) or the Bologna Follow-up Group as a policymaking representative body, specifically for example by an invitation to the annual IEP seminar, also with the objective of informing the pool members of the latest developments in the EHEA.

In the specific context of IEP, it is not clear what benefits a wider engagement of stakeholders in the Steering Committee itself could bring to the programme, and most of all, to the reviewed institutions, and what would be the interest of employers' associations and other stakeholder bodies in getting engaged in the management of IEP. As the Steering Committee does not take any decisions on the review status of institutions (differently from many national accreditation councils or committees), the issue needs to be considered in the specific context of IEP.

6.1.2 Translation of mission into activities

IEP's mission¹⁵ is to support higher education institutions and systems in developing their strategic leadership and capacity to manage change through a process of voluntary institutional evaluations. IEP evaluates higher education institutions in the context of their specific goals and objectives with the aim of improving quality. IEP emphasises an inclusive self-evaluation process and institutional self-knowledge. This supports improved strategic leadership and efficient internal governance and management, as well as contributes to external accountability. Therefore, IEP evaluations focus on the effectiveness of quality culture and the degree to which the outcomes of internal quality processes are used in decision-making and strategic management, as well as on identifying any gaps in these internal mechanisms. The evaluation methodology is based on a peer-review approach, in line with good European and international practice, including the ESG.

The following organisational values underpin and guide IEP's activities and the work of its staff and experts.

- **Collegiality:** IEP pool members and staff respect their colleagues as experienced peers and take collective responsibility for conducting the activities of the programme. Cooperation and communication with evaluated institutions is conducted on a collegial basis.
- **Openness:** IEP staff and pool members conduct their work with an open-minded attitude and are respectful of and receptive to other opinions and approaches.

¹⁵ IEP's mission and goals are publicly available on the IEP website ([here](#)) and are further articulated in the *IEP Strategy 2020-2025*, which is also available on the website.

- Supportiveness: IEP teams conduct all evaluations with the ultimate goal of providing support and encouragement to higher education institutions for their further development. IEP staff and pool members support one another in achieving this goal.
- Honesty: IEP applies the “critical friend” approach to its evaluations, providing constructive criticism from an external perspective. The team communicates its views with professionalism and diplomacy. IEP staff and pool members act with integrity at all times.

The IEP review methodology, with a strong focus on self-assessment process, involvement of the institutional leadership in the evaluation and internal reflections, and the composition and approach of the review panel has been designed to best able to achieve the mission and objectives. IEP has one unique methodology for its evaluation, in which some minor additions or modifications are used both for initial and follow-up evaluations, as well as those with a special focus (internationalisation or research outputs). Also coordinated evaluations, which address all or a part of institutions within a national system follow the same key methodology with some additional elements such as a national level summative report. The methodology has remained in its essence the same since the inception of the programme, and it seems to be still fit-for-purpose and appreciated as a useful exercise by the participating institutions and higher education systems.¹⁶

With the emergence of strategic institutional alliances within the European Universities’ Initiative, the role of IEP could be extended to offer processes fit for the evaluation of such international strategic cooperation, and work is in process to develop and implement such new offers in the future (starting from 2024). The evaluation model would be based on the current IEP methodology, adapted in terms of key questions and practical arrangements so as to meet the specific needs of the European University Alliances.

6.1.3 Strategies for IEP in an increasingly competitive context

A significant key question in terms of strategic planning for IEP is which strategies it could adopt in a new context of more and more agencies offering institutional level evaluation (in the early days of IEP a key distinguishing feature of IEP) and/or enhancement focused QA. When IEP was set up, it responded to a need that was not, by and large, met by national or regional quality assurance agencies for the compulsory external quality assurance of institutions. Now that more agencies are offering similar evaluations – albeit often without the European dimension integrated into the DNA of IEP – IEP needs to reconsider what is its specific added value and communicate that better to institutions and governments across Europe. While the “market” is becoming more competitive, making it harder to demonstrate the added value of IEP, several opportunities are available.

¹⁶ According to feedback collected after the completion of the evaluation through post-evaluation surveys and follow-up video conferences, evaluated institutions agree that the self-evaluation phase is very productive as it encourages and guides self-reflection and that the evaluation process is well structured.

Firstly, IEP could extend its evaluations to European University Alliances, as already mentioned, where the European dimension might be specifically required and appreciated.

Secondly, IEP could promote its evaluations as a valid alternative to a national institutional evaluation. This would be in line with the agreements in the Bologna Process regarding cross-border quality assurance of agencies registered in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). As institutions face financial restrictions, the possibilities of an additional voluntary review, however beneficial, may not be a priority, or not possible at all. Therefore, IEP would need to promote itself rather as an alternative to national external quality assurance rather than as an add on. To do so, IEP would need to engage in dialogue with national ministries to ensure recognition of the process for the compulsory institutional review in their countries.

Thirdly, IEP could consider extending its services more proactively to countries outside the EHEA. IEP has already carried out several evaluations outside of Europe and has been able to observe that the methodology and processes can be usefully used also in different systems beyond the EHEA.¹⁷ However, the promotion of IEP outside of Europe has not been systematic, as the key focus has been on institutions within the EHEA.

6.1.4 Communication about IEP's mission and objectives

How to communicate IEP's uniqueness in its mission and objectives to the higher education sector in Europe (and beyond)?

While evaluations have a strong positive impact on evaluated institutions,¹⁸ IEP's approach and benefits are not widely known. Furthermore, in times of financial cuts, the possibility of opting for additional voluntary processes may simply not be available to many institutions. Finally, as cross-border quality assurance is still a relatively new phenomenon, institutions may not be aware of the opportunities they may have to engage with the foreign or international agency for their compulsory national external quality assurance. The promotion of such evaluations, IEP would need to discuss and make agreements with different national authorities to ensure that it can promote the IEP as a recognised alternative in some systems.

6.2 SWOT analysis

In preparation for the self-assessment report, IEP gathered input for the SWOT analysis from both the SAG and the IEP steering committee. The staff of the secretariat also contributed to the analysis and related discussions. From the material gathered, the SAG identified the most important and frequently mentioned strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the Programme.

Strengths

¹⁷ See E. Cirlan, (2022), [Are the European standards for quality assurance relevant for institutions outside the European Higher Education Area?](#)

¹⁸ The feedback collected after the completion of the evaluation through post-evaluation surveys and follow-up video conferences is always positive.

- A truly European approach, offering a wide range of perspectives, with a genuine peer review approach carried out by committed and experienced pool members
- Profound understanding of different higher education systems and their challenges across Europe
- Enhancement oriented approach that allows for focus on topics important for the evaluated institution
- Simple and useful methodology and process that is fit for purpose and leads to a clear and useful report
- Committed leadership, professional infrastructure, and a professional Secretariat
- Efficient and effective governance
- Good relationship with and support from EUA, with a positive impact on reputation, connections, communication, and financial sustainability

Weaknesses

- Challenges in communicating the usefulness of IEP, particularly to specific regions and/or at the system level, considering also the spread of institutional enhancement led evaluations by the national and regional QA agencies
- The voluntary nature of the follow-up makes it harder to enforce, and when no progress report is submitted, there is uncertainty regarding the use of findings by institutions for their development
- IEP is not recognised in many countries as an alternative to national external QA processes, which means that institutions engage in IEP in addition to other processes, rather than instead of them, increasing thus the financial and human costs to institutions.
- Uneven workload year by year, which makes the management of IEP's HR capacity more difficult and the small size of the Secretariat does not always allow for a fast response to potential new opportunities and markets

Opportunities

- To maintain and reaffirm IEP's unique added value, re-focusing the reviews on support to senior leadership may provide an opportunity to IEP in a crowded external QA environment
- In an environment with more international cooperation, an international review, such as IEP, may become more important and have clearer added value to institutions
- Potential to enhance collaboration with national higher education authorities for system evaluations and to promote IEP as an alternative to national institutional reviews, rather simply as an additional review

- Potential to use the IEP methodology, in an adapted format, for the evaluation on European University Alliances, particularly as they move from project-phase to long-term sustainable partnerships

Threats

- Evaluation overload and availability of institutional external QA in their own system may make it less interesting for institutions to opt for an additional voluntary review, such as IEP
- Level of autonomy of institutions and their possibilities to choose another agency instead of the national one for their compulsory external evaluation
- Shrinking and changing demand and market (other agencies offer similar services, offer evaluations cross border, are ESG compliant)
- IEP needs to charge the cost of the reviews making it potentially less competitive than national agencies

6.3 Future perspectives and conclusions

IEP is very aware that its future sustainability (financially and in terms of the viability of the Programme in general) is dependent on conducting sufficient evaluations each year. Since the last external review, the number of individual evaluations carried out by IEP each year has ranged from one (only in 2020-21) to seven, while there have been no coordinated evaluation exercises in the reporting period due to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The number of registrations is often hard to predict, which makes long term resource planning challenging.

Demand for the evaluations offered by IEP is influenced by a number of contextual factors. These include:

- **Increased competition from other quality assurance agencies.** As more agencies move towards offering improvement-oriented evaluations at institutional level (in accordance with an observable trend in Europe of national frameworks opting for this approach), there is a change in the focus of the added value of an IEP evaluation.
- **Evaluation fatigue.** Institutions are already regularly evaluated through their national frameworks and may opt for subject-specific evaluations for professional programmes. Furthermore, as national quality assurance systems mature, institutions may have already undergone several cycles of external evaluation. The motivation for an additional, voluntary evaluation is therefore reduced.
- **Diminishing financial resources.** Institutions face ever-increasing pressures on their budgets and there is limited funding available for voluntary quality assurance processes such as IEP.

The IEP Steering Committee also regularly discusses the option of expanding the services offered by IEP in order to cater for the changing demands of the market. Developing the option of evaluations

with a special focus is a step already taken in that direction, and so is the current development of a review process specifically intended to be used by the European University Alliances. Also, promotion of IEP as an alternative to national evaluations may be a future development.

The Steering Committee and the SAG also identified a need to be more proactive in communicating about IEP in order to capitalise on potential opportunities for evaluations. This includes ensuring emerging markets are aware of what IEP can offer, and taking advantage of the power of word of mouth when it comes to attracting individual institutions to register for IEP, particularly with regards to those outside Europe, and with system level evaluations within Europe. As such, there may be potential to make better use of evaluated institutions and pool members to act as ambassadors for IEP.

A further challenge of which IEP is well aware is that of the follow-up processes. As has already been outlined in this report, IEP recognises that the voluntary nature of the evaluation poses a difficulty as institutional follow-up cannot be enforced. A number of measures to support follow-up actions have been introduced since the last external review. The number of follow-up evaluations carried out by IEP has increased in recent years and there has been some initial interest in the 'combined package'. However, IEP acknowledges that the numbers of progress reports that it receives could be improved, although there is no possibility to enforce this. A follow-up in the form of a webinar for all evaluated institutions in a cycle might be an option to ensure and encourage higher levels of engagement.

Glossary of Terms

Initial evaluation: a comprehensive evaluation for individual institutions who have not had an IEP evaluation before, or had one over three years ago.

Follow-up evaluation: an evaluation to support institutions that had an initial evaluation between one and three years ago.

Regular evaluations: evaluations conducted as part of the IEP's annual evaluation cycle, not part of coordinated evaluations.

Coordinated evaluations: evaluations of all or some of the institutions in a particular country, system or region, usually at the request of the relevant ministry or public authority.

IEP pool: the group of experts trained to conduct IEP evaluations, from which the evaluation teams are drawn.

List of annexes

1. Governance of IEP: Roles and responsibilities, March 2023 (Terms of Reference)
2. Guidelines for managing the IEP pool
3. Guidelines for the Secretariat
4. Guidelines for Teams
5. Handbook for writing IEP evaluation reports
6. Annual Report 2021-22
7. Analysis of surveys to IEP pool and evaluated institutions, 2021-22
8. Work Programme 2022-23
9. Overview of the IEP pool
10. Overview of IEP evaluations
11. IEP Evaluations from 2018-2019
12. IEP strategic priorities 2020 – 2025