



**Maldives
Qualifications
Authority**

GUIDELINES FOR INSTITUTIONAL AUDIT

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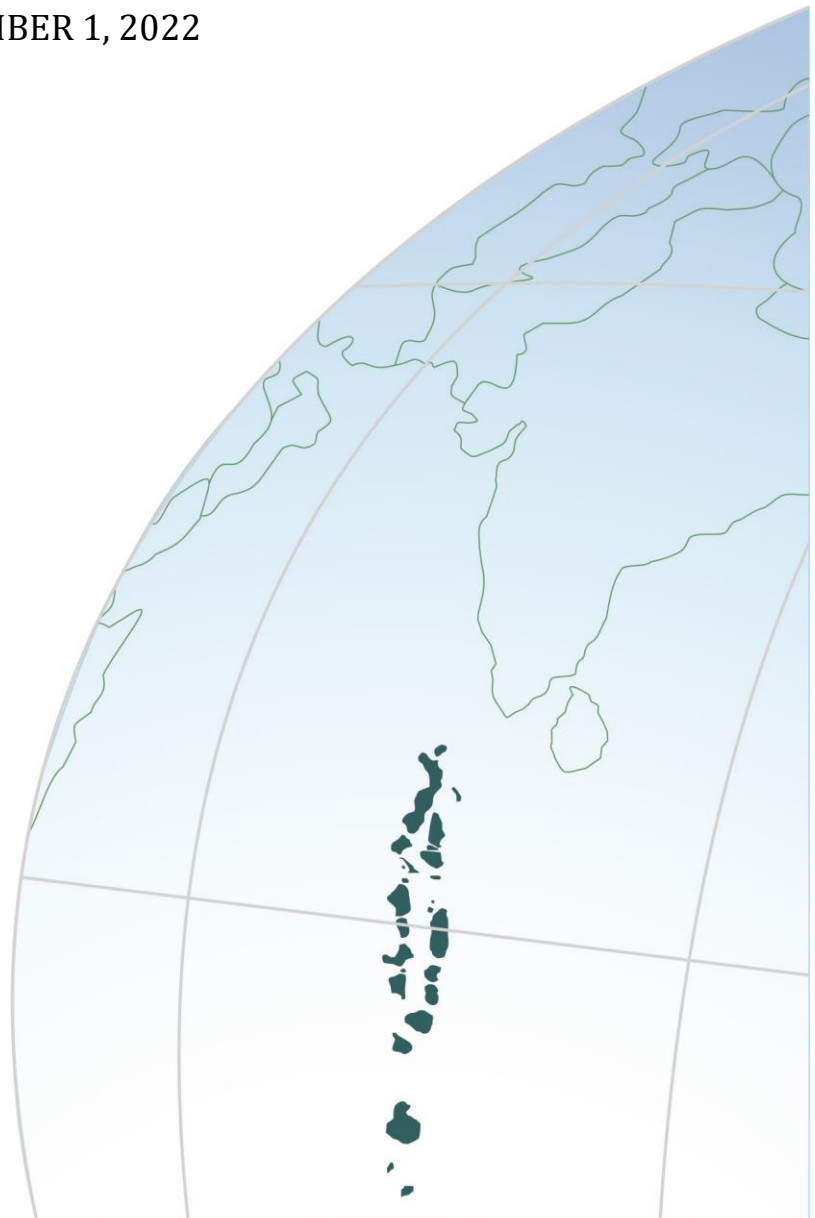


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1. Introduction

The purpose of this Guideline is to provide information to higher education institutions about the process of the institutional audit carried out by the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) including guidelines for various stages of audit and guidelines for people involved in the process such as audit panels, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), MQA staff, etc., in their assessment work.

This Guideline for the Institutional Audit is adopted pursuant to Sections 8 (c) and 18 of the Act No. 7/2021 (Maldives Higher Education and Training Act) and Section 5 of the Regulation No: R-79/2022 (Institutional Audit Regulation) to develop and form the mandatory criteria to be followed in conducting institutional audits of all higher education institutions operating in the Maldives.

Institutional Audit is defined as “an evidence-based process carried out through peer review that investigates the procedures and the mechanisms by which an institution ensures its quality assurance and quality enhancement”¹. Unlike accreditation, a yes/ no decision is not involved in academic audit.

Institutional Audit has 4 following main stages:

- A **Self-evaluation** (sometimes called **self-study**) carried out by the institution in the light of guidelines and regulations issued by MQA;
- Appointment of an **Audit Panel**, whose review of the institution would start with a review of the self-evaluation report;
- **Site visits** by the Audit Panel, involving meetings with senior academic and administrative staff and students. The visit enables the external experts to review and inspect the premises, relevant specialist equipment, and the actual teaching and learning process through attendance at lectures and classes or the inspection of students’ work; and
- An **Audit Report** (also called **public report**), with recommendations of MQA.

¹ Vlăsceanu et al (2007, p. 31)



Figure 1: Stages of Institutional Audit

The guidelines are an explanatory document to the MQA Criteria for Institutional Audit and have formal status. Therefore, they are to be followed during the institutional audit process in order to ensure consistency and coherence of the auditing process.

It is highly recommended that higher education institutions study these guidelines carefully in order to simplify the auditing process, thus facilitating the work of MQA and its audit panels. Furthermore, it should be noted that adherence to these guidelines will also ensure that the review process will be most useful for the higher education institution and generally be of high quality. The criteria and guidelines are supposed to enable higher education institutions to analyse and evaluate their quality performance in relation to their mission and guide them through the process of self-evaluation.

The criteria for institutional audit have been developed in consultation with higher education institutions and also based on worldwide best practice in order to ensure their acceptance in and usefulness for the academic community.

2. Objective of Institutional Audits

The objective of institutional audits is to strengthen the operations of higher education institutions by providing them with feedback on their performance. Therefore, the intention is also to strengthen the higher education sector in Maldives as a whole.

Institutional audit represents an activity by which a higher education institution is assessed in terms of a set of established criteria as well as against the achievement of its own mission.

An institutional audit is not a process that results in a yes/ no decision. Rather, it builds strongly on the principles of continuous quality enhancement. The institutional audit is coordinated by MQA and includes cyclical site-visits undertaken by appointed audit panels that comprise experts in quality assurance and institutional leadership. The focus of audits is at the systems level, with a particular focus on policies, processes and procedures. Thus, institutional audits differ substantially from accreditation processes that take place at the level of study programmes.

The audit is based on the concept of a peer-review process. The audit panel base their opinion on evidence gathered in relation to the institutional capacity and performance in terms of the MQA Criteria for Institutional Audits, which give a substantial role to the achievement of the mission of a higher education institution.

The process therefore follows the general policy that quality assurance is a continuous process, for which the higher education institution carries the main responsibility. Institutional audits are a key component of the external quality assurance for higher education in the Maldives. The external review only takes place every three years, which is the duration of the validity of an audit outcome and does not interfere with the autonomy of higher education institutions. It is rather to be understood as a support process for higher education institutions, whilst ensuring the general and continuous improvement of higher education provision in the Republic of Maldives.

The obligation to undergo an institutional audit applies to all higher education institutions operating in the Republic of Maldives, regardless of whether they are public or private, or whether they are Maldivian or a foreign institution.

MQA firmly believes in the enhancement of quality of higher education provision. Therefore, in the process of institutional audits, a great emphasis is given to suggestions and recommendations as well as their implementation. It is not a process that uses a checklist approach for compliance with criteria. It takes due notice of the diversity of institutions and their profiles and missions. The process of institutional audits is aimed at fostering a quality culture within higher education institutions and in the higher education sector in the Maldives as a whole.

The process of institutional audits has been designed on the basis of the mandate given to MQA Act No. 7/2021 (Maldives Higher Education and Training Act). and follows the values that MQA stands for and abides by in all its work. In particular, these values are transparency, objectivity, neutrality and excellence. It is part of the objectives of MQA to support the building of an effective national quality assurance system. Therefore, the process of institutional audits follows internationally accepted good practices in the area of quality assurance and provides for state-of-the-art adaptation of these practices in the context of the higher education system in the Republic of Maldives.

3. Roadmap and time frame

The following section outlines the roadmap towards undertaking an institutional audit and provides steps/ processes for an indicative timeframe. These processes reflect the 4 main stages of Institutional Audit conducted by MQA: (1) self-evaluation; (2) appointment of an Audit Panel; (3) Site visits; and (4) Audit Report. Higher education institutions are asked to start the procedure well in advance in order to allow for sufficient time for the auditing process to be completed.

3.1 Initiating the Institutional Audit process

MQA will have the responsibility of initiating Institutional Audit process by inviting selected HEIs for any given year to submit their Self Evaluation Reports (SERs) to MQA. Upon receipt of the SER – as detailed in the Institutional Audit Manual – MQA will send the higher education institution a contract, outlining the responsibilities of both the higher education institution and MQA. MQA has to send the same initiation letter to any government requested HEI/ provider – if any – as stated under Section 7 (a) – (2) of the Institutional Audit Regulation.

The fees for an institutional audit are set by MQA as stated under the Section 10 of the Institutional Audit Regulation. The fees comprise all costs related to the auditing process, including the follow-up procedures. The fees are used to cover expenses and honorariums of the Audit Panel as well as overhead costs of the MQA. The fees are due 14 days after signing the contract and shall be transferred to the account of MQA in accordance with the relevant government policies. The details of the account can be found in the contract. In addition, the applying higher education institution is in charge of covering transportation costs and, if necessary, of organising local transportation arrangements for the Audit Panel. Further details about the fee can be found in the Institutional Audit Regulation.

3.2 Self-evaluation process

An important element in the process of institutional audits is the self-evaluation undertaken by the respective higher education institution. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the higher education institution to start the internal procedures for the preparation of the audit, in order to ensure timely submission of the self-evaluation report and all other relevant documentation. The self-evaluation process can be a time-consuming activity, given consideration to the fact that it needs to be undertaken by staff who also have to fulfil their everyday obligations.

It is recommended that a working group is set up that is in charge of the self-evaluation process. This group should comprise of people in the institutional

leadership, the leadership of various departments, academic and administrative staff as well as students. Ensuring a broad base of people involved in the process will provide a more holistic view about the strengths and weaknesses of the institution. At the same time, the size of the group should allow for effective and efficient meetings.

It may be useful to designate individual responsibilities for certain parts of the self-evaluation report. However, the group should allow for discussions and comments on the whole report, as the self-evaluation process is a collective reflection. It is also recommended that one person carries the overall responsibility for compiling the final report in order to ensure that the report is drawn up in a consistent manner and style. The self-evaluation group should regularly meet in order to discuss progress and exchange views.

Ideally, a self-evaluation exercise is not only carried out in preparation of an institutional audit. It should take place on a periodic basis, e.g., every two years. It should be understood by the higher education institution that quality assurance is a continuous process that primarily serves the institution itself and is not just undertaken for the sake of satisfying the responsibility in view of an external review.

The higher education institution should ensure that all necessary data are being collected and analysed. It might be useful to develop specific benchmarks against which the institutional performance would be measured. These could either be other higher education institution in Maldives or higher education institutions from abroad. It is important that the benchmarked institutions are of a comparable nature in terms of their profile and overall conditions whilst at the same time the benchmarking should provide for a challenging perspective.

It is good practice that key performance indicators are used in order to measure progress. These indicators should be established on the basis of the overall strategy of the higher education institution and specific goals and objectives in the main areas of operations, such as teaching and learning, research or community service.

The goal of the self-evaluation process is to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to strengthen the capacity for improvement through a self-reflective process. Hence, it is of great importance that the self-evaluation is undertaken in a manner that allows for and encourages critical reflection and analysis.

Therefore, it is important that the group does not work in isolation, but gathers feedback throughout the academic community in the higher education institution. This may be done in formal ways, such as questionnaires, or in more informal discussions. In any case, it is important to ensure that everybody concerned is well aware of the task and remit of the self-evaluation group in order to provide adequate input. In addition, feedback from external stakeholders, such as graduates or employers should be gathered and taken into account in the self-evaluation process.

As further guidance, a procedure for conducting self-evaluations to assist the higher education institutions is included in the Manual for Institutional Audit. This procedure would provide a flow chart of tasks, detail the criteria for self-evaluation, and list specific questions to ask under each criterion, and indicate related data/evidence to collect with respect to these questions.

3.3 Self-evaluation Report

The self-evaluation report is a crucial element in the review process. It constitutes the finalisation of the whole self-evaluation process. The self-evaluation report is the major document that the audit panel is using in its work.

It should therefore comprise all essential information that would be necessary for an outsider to understand properly the operation of a higher education institution. The self-evaluation report should adequately describe all features related to the higher education institution. However, it is essential that the self-evaluation is not merely descriptive, but to a large extent also analytical in its findings. Equally, it is important to provide evidence for the findings in order to allow an outside reader to understand how the self-evaluation group arrived at its conclusions.

It would be expected that the self-evaluation report does not just list strengths and weaknesses, but also proposes solutions for the further development and how shortcomings would be remedied. This should be done in the form of specific actions to be taken, indicating a clear time frame. It is good practice that the actions proposed conclude individual chapters in the self-evaluation report. The self-evaluation report in this manner would not only be a document in the context of the institutional audit, but it would allow for it being used as an internal working document and guide.

It is expected that the self-evaluation consists of an introductory part that provides general information about the higher education institution in the context of the higher education system in Maldives. It should furthermore address each MQA criterion separately. The self-evaluation report should conclude with a summary of the findings and proposed actions.

The self-evaluation report should be as concise as possible whilst containing all essential information. Important documents that outline specific issues in more detail and/or provide documentary evidence should be annexed to the report and referred to in the main body of the text.

The individual sections addressing the criteria should address all relevant points outlined in this guideline. It would be good practice that a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis is carried out for each criterion separately in order to evaluate the performance of the higher education institution. It would also be good practice to also carry out a PEST (political, economic, social, technological) analysis for the higher education institution as a whole.

As the overall self-evaluation exercise is supposed to be of a holistic nature, it is also important that the findings of the self-assessment report are distributed widely to everybody concerned. This is not just essential for information purposes, but will also allow individuals to take action in their areas of responsibilities. It is part of a quality culture that every person working in the higher education institution takes into account how to enhance quality as part of their everyday work.

It is expected that a first self-evaluation report can be an ambitious task and may take up considerable time. The final report that is being submitted should be assessed in terms of its readability, clarity and comprehensiveness. The report should be submitted in English language in order to allow easy access to information for international reviewers. The self-evaluation report has to be submitted to MQA by the deadline given by MQA in the initiation letter. It has to be submitted in electronic form and in one hard copy. MQA will forward the report to the Audit Panel members. The legal representative of the higher education institution should sign the report.

3.4 Audit Panel Nomination

Upon submission of the self-evaluation report and after the contract with the higher education institution for an institutional audit has been signed, MQA appoints a panel of reviewers. This panel comprises of 3 to 5 members; 5 for universities and colleges and 3 for institutes. One of the members is appointed by MQA to be the Chair of the audit panel. The members should have substantial experience in higher education and understand the diversity of higher education institutions. It is ensured that the panel has adequate competence in terms of teaching and learning processes, including learning outcomes, and of other regulations or processes such as qualifications frameworks or quality assurance.

The reviewers are appointed from a pool of reviewers that MQA maintains. MQA organises a regular selection process for new reviewers to become members of the pool. The pool consists of both national and international reviewers. MQA seeks nominations for the pool of reviewers from higher education institutions as well.

MQA ensures that the reviewers are specifically trained for the work they undertake. For this reason, MQA organises regular trainings on review and institutional audit methodology generally and for specific areas of relevance.

It is of utmost importance for MQA to ensure the objectivity of the reviewers. Therefore, specific measures are taken to prevent possible conflicts of interest. Reviewers cannot have an affiliation with the higher education institution under

review. Reviewers have to sign a declaration of no-conflict-of-interest. MQA appoints the reviewers, using several criteria, including gender balance and a mix between more experienced and new reviewers.

The Audit Panel members also have to agree to and sign a non-disclosure statement. In this statement the reviewers declare that all information obtained during the process of the institutional audit remains confidential and is only used for the work of the Audit Panel internally as well as to inform the writing of the Audit Panel report.

After the Audit Panel is appointed, MQA communicates the names and CVs of the reviewers to the higher education institution. The higher education institution may express concerns in written form within 10 days about one or several of the panel members to MQA as stipulated in the Section 9 (g) of the Institutional Audit Regulation.

3.5 Site Visit

An essential element of the external review and institutional audit process is the Site visit. The duration of the Site visit depends on the specifics of the higher education institution, but it normally lasts two to three days. During the Site visit, the Audit Panel conducts a series of interviews with different groups, scrutinises relevant documents and assesses the campus and facilities.

Interviews would usually be conducted with the leadership of the institution, management of study programmes, full-time as well as part-time academic staff, administrative support staff, students, graduates and employers.

The interview groups should not comprise of more than 8 members in order to ensure efficiency of the meetings. All meetings will be conducted in a confidential manner and no information provided will be associated with any individual. Hence, during the individual meetings only the respective groups of interviewees can be present so that the meetings will be conducted in a private atmosphere.

As the Audit Panel works on a tight schedule, the meeting will, after brief introductions, focus on the questions that the Audit Panel has prepared. The interviewees shall not prepare any formal presentations and are asked to respond to the questions in a concise manner.

The exact schedule of the site-visit depends on the specific circumstances regarding the higher education institution. It is set in advance between MQA, the higher education institution and the Audit Panel. Between each interview session, the Audit Panel will have some time for debriefing in order to discuss the main findings. For this reason, the higher education institution should provide the Audit Panel with a private meeting room.

The higher education institution is supposed to designate a liaison person who will be in communication with the team for all practical matters. This might also involve additional documents that the review team requests, will be made available. The liaison person should ensure that for each interview a list of the attendees is prepared and given to the attention of the Audit Panel. It should be avoided that the Audit Panel meets the same person more than twice in different interviews.

The interviewees should be open and frank in their responses. A self-critical perspective is much more fruitful in order to identify areas for improvement from which the higher education institution would benefit.

The main purpose of the site visit is to validate and substantiate the self-evaluation report findings and to seek evidence also in further documentation. The review team would let the higher education institution know in advance what types of further documents should be provided on the spot. It may, however, also ask for additional documentation during the site-visit.

3.6 Audit Report

On the basis of the self-evaluation report and the site visit, the Audit Panel will write its report. A template of the report outline is attached to this document as

Annex 1. The audit report shall be written in a manner that it is easy for an outside person to understand. The report needs to be evidence-based and include appropriate information about all the MQA criteria for institutional audits.

It is expected that within each section of the report, the Audit Panel describes the situation, undertakes an analysis in terms of each criterion, and concludes with a final statement. In addition, the Audit Panel should provide recommendations for improvement where necessary. These recommendations should clearly refer to the analysis. At the end of the report, the Audit Panel will provide a summative overview of the recommendations.

At the end of the site visit, the Audit Panel makes a brief presentation about its main findings to the higher education institution. The Audit Panel will also summarise the next steps towards the approval of its report by MQA. The presentation is not meant to be a discussion. Hence, no questions or comments are allowed. The representatives of the higher education institution are invited to formally thank the Audit Panel though.

After the site-visit, the Audit Panel will compile its draft audit report. This report will be sent to the higher education institution excluding the section about the Audit Panel's recommendation about accreditation. The higher education institution has 10 days to check the accuracy of the report and to bring any factual mistakes to the attention of the Audit Panel. However, apart from factual mistakes, the higher education institution cannot comment on the substance of the report or its findings. The Audit Panel will correct potential mistakes within 10 days and send the final report to MQA.

3.7 Approval of the audit report and Publication

After receiving the final report from the Audit Panel, staff of MQA will scrutinise the report. MQA may, in case of any ambiguities, refer the report back to the Audit Panel for further explanations. In this case, the Audit Panel will respond to the specific questions of MQA. The final report will be discussed and approved by the MQA Board as stipulated under Section 13 (a) of the Institutional Audit Regulation. In its deliberations, the Board of MQA will ensure consistency and coherence in terms of recommendations made.

After the approval of the audit report by the Board of MQA, the higher education institution will be notified in writing about the adoption of the report alongside a copy of the final Audit report. MQA will publish the report on its website as stipulated under Section 14 of the Institutional Audit Regulation.

As the institutional audit does not result in a yes/no decision about compliance and thus does not include any formal consequences, there is no appeals process. Higher education institution may, however, complain to MQA in cases of unprofessional or inadequate behaviour or work of the Audit Panel.

3.8 Follow-up process

The external component of quality assurance in relation to the institutional audit does not end with the site-visit and the report publication. MQA has a structured follow-up system in place in order to ensure that higher education institutions fully benefit from its expertise.

After the Audit Report is approved by the MQA Board and sent to the higher education institution, the higher education institution is required to establish an action plan and submit this plan to MQA within 6 weeks. In this action plan, a period not exceeding 2 years could be allocated to bring changes that are not related to development of additional physical facilities. Physical facility related changes could be planned over a period not exceeding 3 years, depending on the nature of the change required. The action plan shall be based on the recommendations and suggestions contained in the panel report. The higher education institution then needs to report progress to MQA in relation to the implementation of the action plan on an annual basis.

MQA assesses the annual progress report and provides feedback to the higher education institution. This feedback might entail to ask the higher education institution to revise the action plan, if necessary, in order to further enhance the quality of the higher education institution.

4. Standards for assessment

The Audit Panel assesses the higher education institution in relation to each individual criterion. In doing this, the Audit Panel pays particular attention to the mission of the higher education institution.

The final outcome of the institutional audit is a report containing commendations, affirmations, recommendations and suggestions. As there is no yes/no decision involved, also no decision about compliance with any of the individual criteria are made.

It is the purpose of the institutional audit and the review report to provide a higher education institution with feedback on its performance generally and in relation to the different areas of management and operation. Therefore, the assessment is undertaken in a way that will assist the higher education institution in further ensuing its mission, mitigating weaknesses and building on its strengths.

In order to allow for better comparability of the outcomes of an institutional audit, the performance of a higher education institution is rated with regard to each individual criterion and as a whole. The rating is based on a system of 1 to 5 stars. The rating is given according to the following judgements:

★★★★★: The higher education institution meets every aspect of the criteria and excels in its performance beyond the requirements of the criteria.

★★★★: The higher education institution meets all the criteria.

★★★: The higher education institution meets the majority of the criteria. However, there are certain aspects that have to be addressed in order to improve the performance.

★★: The higher education institution meets some of the criteria. There is a range of aspects that have to be addressed in order to improve the performance.

★: The higher education institution meets only few or none of the criteria. Immediate action is necessary to address the shortcomings.

5. Interpretation of criteria

In this section information is provided about the criteria that are used in the process of an institutional audit. The intention of the information provided is three-fold. Firstly, it should give higher education institutions a clear guideline for their understanding of the criteria so that they are also in a position to better evaluate themselves. Secondly, review teams use the information so that they better assess the individual criteria in the course of the site-visit and writing of the review report. Thirdly, the information is used by MQA in order to ensure consistency and coherence of decision regarding the approval of institutional audits. Whilst due care is given to the preparation and training of reviewers, it is still essential that MQA retains the possibility to ensure that similar conditions are evaluated similarly and that differences between higher education institutions are also taken into account.

The criteria for institutional audits address seven areas:

- Criterion 1: Mission achievement 10 points
- Criterion 2: Quality Assurance 15 points
- Criterion 3: Governance and Planning 10 points
- Criterion 4: Teaching and Learning 20 points
- Criterion 5: Staffing 10 points
- Criterion 6: Facilities and Resources 15 points
- Criterion 7: Research 05 points
- Criterion 8: Admission, Records and Support Services 15 points

1) Criterion 1 – Mission achievement

- (1) *The higher education institution operates on the basis of an adequate mission.*
- (2) *The higher education institution works towards achieving its mission through a comprehensive strategy, which is derived from the mission.*

The mission of a higher education institution is vital to guide the strategy and operations of the institution. The mission should therefore be formally adopted by the highest academic decision-making body of a higher education institution.

The mission statement should be written in a manner that it appropriately reflects the characteristics of the higher education institution. The mission statement should therefore not just refer to basic principles that are applicable to any higher education institution, such as quality in teaching and research, but rather point out the unique features and ambitions of a higher education institution.

In order to facilitate the use of the mission statement, it should be disseminated and communicated throughout the higher education institution. Furthermore, it should be known to the wider public. Hence, the mission should be publicly available.

As the mission is supposed to guide a higher education institution in its planning and operations, the institutional strategy should be derived from the mission statement. Hence, the strategy should be aimed at achieving and implementing the mission of a higher education institution. It would be expected that the strategy is underpinned by an action plan and a corresponding financial strategy that adequately takes into account strategic priorities.

The strategy should reflect short-term, medium-term and long-term objectives. It would normally be expected that the objectives are translated into key performance indicators that allow for measuring the progress of the implementation of the institutional strategy.

Furthermore, it is expected that the higher education institution periodically reviews and adjusts its strategy in order to reflect progress made and to take into account changing circumstances.

2) Criterion 2 – Quality Assurance

- (1) *The higher education institution has a system and strategy of quality assurance in place, which is aimed at the enhancement of quality and the development of a quality culture and is widely shared throughout the institution.*

- (2) *The higher education institution has adequate processes for the management and implementation of its quality assurance policy and strategy, thus informing its operations.*
- (3) *The quality assurance system encompasses all areas of operation of the higher education institution.*

It is essential that a higher education institution assumes responsibility for the quality of its operations. It should therefore have in place a system of quality assurance that focuses on the enhancement of quality, supported by a quality assurance strategy. This system and the strategy should be based on a general policy on quality assurance. The policy is supposed to be developed with the support of different stakeholders. Furthermore, the policy should be publicly available. Both the policy and the system in place should ensure that stakeholders, i.e. management, academic staff, administrative staff, students and external stakeholders, have an active role in carrying out quality assurance activities.

The continuous enhancement of the quality of a higher education institution depends on the commitment of everybody involved in the institution. Hence, the quality assurance system of a higher education institution should place an emphasis on the development of a quality culture, which necessitates that appropriate measures are in place and widely known so that every member of staff clearly embraces the idea of quality enhancement as an integral part of their work.

In order to manage the quality assurance activities, a higher education institution should have in place adequate processes, which support the implementation of the institutional quality assurance strategy. These processes have to be managed with clear responsibilities for the individual people involved. The processes should be embedded into an appropriate structure. The outcomes of the processes should be continuously integrated into the operations of a higher education institution, in particular into the overall management, planning, decision-making and administrative functions.

It is vital that the quality assurance system of a higher education institution covers all aspects of its operations. Hence, the quality assurance system needs to include all units and areas within a higher education institution, including teaching and learning, research, engagement with the community, management, governance, administration and support services.

In order to support the enhancement of quality, the quality assurance system should provide for relevant information and data that can be used for strategic management and development and to mitigate identified weaknesses.

As part of the quality assurance policy, it is expected that a higher education institution regularly reviews its quality assurance system with a view to improving the system's effectiveness and impact.

Furthermore, the quality assurance policy should also entail a provision to periodically undergo external quality assurance through MQA.

3) Criterion 3 – Governance and Planning

- (1) The higher education institution has an effective governance system in place, which supports its operations.*
- (2) The higher education institution's governance ensures an appropriate division and distribution of responsibilities and accountabilities.*

The governance system of a higher education institution should be designed in a manner that it best and most effectively supports the achievement of the institutional mission and the implementation of the institutional strategy.

The governance system should ensure that academic staff, administrative staff as well as students are adequately involved in decision-making. In order to facilitate this in the most efficient manner, a clear division and distribution of responsibilities and accountabilities are essential. A description of the roles for each unit or body should be readily available.

The decision-making processes need to be transparent. This requires appropriate documentation, including minutes, for all decision-making bodies. It should also be ensured that all individuals who are concerned by a decision are appropriately informed about the decision in a timely manner, including a clear description of the impact of the decision on them.

In order to ensure that a higher education institution best caters to the needs of the outside world and society at large, the governance system should foresee a role for external stakeholders.

4) Criterion 4 – Teaching and Learning

- (1) The higher education institution has an effective system in place for ensuring that its study programmes are designed and offered in line with the requirements of the Maldives National Qualifications Framework.*
- (2) The higher education institution has an adequate system of regulations and procedures, supported by policies, relating to all aspects of students' experience.*
- (3) The higher education institution ensures that students have an appropriate learning environment, including adequate facilities, libraries, IT infrastructure and support, and academic guidance.*

It is essential that a higher education institution has an effective system in place for the design, approval, monitoring and review of the study programmes it offers. This system needs to guarantee that the requirements resulting from the Maldives National Qualifications Framework for each study programme are systematically taken into account. Furthermore, the system should also ensure that the offers in terms of study programmes adequately correspond to the mission and strategy of the higher education institution.

The higher education institution should ensure that its study programmes are in line with the needs and requirements of the labour market. The study programmes should also effectively integrate theory and practice and place a focus on employability.

The higher education institution should publicly provide adequate information about its study programmes, including provisions about credits, learning outcomes, the methods of teaching, learning and assessment as well as information about admission, progression and completion. Information about the MQA accredited academic programmes should be provided in the Self-Evaluation Report.

The higher education institution should have in place clear and consistently applied regulations about student admission that ensure that the minimum admission criteria are respected. The higher education institution should also ensure that alternative entry criteria are not the predominant entry route, but rather an additional option offered for a certain percentage of applicants. Evidence of implementation of this process should be provided in the Self-Evaluation Report with supporting information.

The higher education institution should also have in place a system and policy that ensures the adequate recognition of periods of studies in a timely and fair manner. The policy on recognition of periods of studies should ensure that recognition is granted unless there are substantial differences.

The higher education institution should also have a guideline with regard to advanced standing. Through this guideline, it should be ensured that only 1/3 of the credits of a programme could be considered as advanced standing. Furthermore, such a guideline should ensure that advanced standing can only be granted for learning, which took place at a higher or equal to the one for which a student is applying.

The higher education institution should have a system in place that ensures that the credits system is consistently applied to all study programmes. Through this system, it needs to be guaranteed that one credit is awarded for 10 hours of learning time of an average student, embracing contact hours, as well as self-study, assignments, workshop or laboratory time, research activities or practical placements. There should also be a mechanism to systematically ensure that the calculation of the workload and hence the credit numbers are realistic and that the total number of credits for one year of full-time study would normally amount to 120.

The higher education institution should also ensure that the standards and minimum requirements resulting from the MNQF are met regardless of the mode of delivery of a study programme.

The higher education institution should have a system in place that guarantees that the learning outcomes for study programmes adequately correspond to the level descriptors as outlined in the MNQF and that the teaching, learning and assessment methods appropriately relate to the learning outcomes. It would also be expected that a higher education institution has a policy in place that determines that written examinations are part of the assessment methods.

The higher education institution should ensure that students have access to adequate learning resources, including adequate facilities, libraries, IT infrastructure and support, as well as academic guidance. The higher education institution should also ensure an appropriate learning environment, in particular through counselling and other support services.

The higher education institution should have a policy on student assessment that guarantees that students are fairly assessed on the basis of consistently applied and transparent regulations. Furthermore, the higher education institution should ensure that regulations and procedures against plagiarism and other forms of academic malpractice are thoroughly enforced.

The higher education institution should have in place a system for the documentation and storage of student achievements.

5) Criterion 5 – Staffing

(1) The higher education institution ensures that it has an adequate number of qualified academic and administrative staff to carry out its operations.

A higher education institution needs to ensure that it employs a sufficient number of academic and administrative staff in order to carry out its activities. In order to guarantee the adequacy of its staff, a higher education institution would be expected to have a general policy on maximum student-staff ratios.

The staff employed by a higher education institution needs to be well qualified for the activities they undertake. For academic staff it is necessary that they possess a qualification higher than the qualification to which the course they teach is leading. This needs to be taken into account in a well-defined system that a higher education institution should use for the recruitment and promotion of its staff. This system should therefore place a strong emphasis on appropriate qualifications, competences and skills of the staff.

In order to further enhance the quality of its staff, a higher education institution should provide for and encourage professional development options for its staff on the basis of a needs assessment. Furthermore, there should be a system in place that ensures that staff regularly undergo a performance review with a view to enhancing quality and to recognise excellent practice.

6) Criterion 6 – Facilities and Resources

- (1) The higher education institution has appropriate financial resources to undertake its operations.*
- (2) The higher education institution plans its financial resources in a strategic manner in order to achieve its mission.*
- (3) The higher education institution has adequate facilities to support and enhance the student experience and its other activities.*

It is essential that a higher education institution has appropriate financial resources to undertake its activities. It should therefore be documented that a higher education institution aligns its strategy and offerings of study programmes with a financial strategy. It is therefore vital that a higher education institution shows that it manages its financial resources efficiently and effectively.

The budget of a higher education institution should be appropriate for the attainment of its mission and the implementation of its strategy. Therefore, the budgetary procedures should also allow for medium-term financial planning.

The accounting system used by a higher education institution should correspond to accepted professional accounting standards and be in line with national regulations. Furthermore, a higher education institution should ensure that it regularly is subject to an external financial auditing process.

The higher education institution needs to ensure that the facilities it has are suitable to safeguard an adequate learning environment. The facilities therefore relate to infrastructure that is directly related to academic tasks. However, also the supporting facilities, such as recreational facilities, cafeterias, etc. are important to facilitate academic success. Furthermore, the facilities also need to be appropriate for other operations of the higher education institution so that it can successfully achieve its mission.

7) Criterion 7 – Research

- (1) The higher education institution has an institutional research policy and strategy, supported by appropriate regulations and procedures.*
- (2) The higher education institution provides adequate and sufficient facilities and equipment for the research activities of staff and students in line with its strategies.*

A higher education institution should have a specific policy and strategy on research. The policy and strategy should be in line with the institutional mission and overall strategy. This may entail a stronger focus on basic or applied research.

The implementation of the institutional research policy and strategy should be supported by regulations and procedures relating to all aspects of research activities, including issues of intellectual property.

The higher education institution should have in place a system that ensures that all research activities are undertaken according to internationally accepted methodological standards. Furthermore, the higher education institution should have mechanisms in place to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

The higher education institution should take measures to guarantee that adequate and sufficient facilities and equipment are available for research activities of both students and staff, including access to appropriate academic literature.

It is expected that a higher education institution encourages research collaboration both across the higher education institution and with other higher education institutions. The higher education institution is also expected to appropriately integrate the outcomes of research into its teaching activities.

8) Criterion 8: Admission, Records & Support Services

- (1) The institution has an effective system to register students and to maintain up-to-date student records.*
- (2) The institution has arrangements in place to provide academic and extra-curricular support services.*

The higher education institution should have systems to manage student recruitment, admission, registration, granting of advanced standing, and to maintain up-to-date student records. The institution should also provide support services for students that includes orientation (academic and social), and academic counselling/advising.

Opportunities for students to form associations, student clubs, and to experience student leadership should also be provided. Further, the HEI should facilitate co-curricular and sports activities and provide opportunities for community involvement for students.

6. Entry into force of this guideline

This guideline shall come into force from the date it is published in the Gazette of the Government of the Maldives.

Appendix I: Template for the Audit Report

Name of the higher education institution

	Contact information	Audit Panel Team
Date	Date of the Visit	Names of Audit Panel members
MQA staff member in charge of the review	Name Email Phone	
Liaison person at institution	Name Email Phone	

Audit report

1. Introduction

(The panel should provide brief information about the higher education and the review)

2. General Findings

(The panel should describe its general findings about the higher education institution, including a description, analysis and conclusion)

3. Performance in relation to the criteria

(In this section, the panel should describe the findings in relation to each of the seven criteria. Every criterion needs to be thoroughly evaluated. Therefore, the panel should briefly describe the situation at the higher education institution, analyse the situation for the criteria, taking into account the indicators, provide for commendations and recommendations (if applicable) and give a rating for each indicator and criterion as a whole – as instructed)

Criterion	Indicator	Comments (The review team should comment on the evidence in an analytical manner)	Commendations (Any commendations should be outlined in this section)	Recommendations (Any recommendations for improvement should be outlined in this section)	Points (The review team assigns a number of points to each criterion, based on the compliance with the criteria. The number of maximum points differs)

					between the criteria to take into account their relative importance)
1) Mission achievement	The higher education institution has a formally adopted mission by the highest academic decision-making body, which is defined within the context of national /(local) development priorities.				<i>A maximum of 10 Points are assigned to this criterion</i> <i>2 Points</i>
	The mission reflects the characteristics of the higher education institution.				2 points
	The mission is widely known in the higher education institution.				1 point
	The mission is publicly available.				1 point

	The higher education institution derives its strategy from its mission and accompanies it by an action plan.				2 points
	The higher education institution periodically reviews its strategy.				2 points
2) Quality Assurance	The higher education institution has a systematic approach to its internal quality assurance activities.				<i>A maximum of 15 Points are assigned to this criterion</i> 2 points
	The higher education institution has a quality assurance strategy				1 point
	The higher education institution has a publicly available				2 points

	policy on quality assurance				
	The higher education institution actively involves stakeholders in its quality assurance activities				1 point
	The higher education institution focuses on the enhancement of quality and fosters the development of a quality culture				2 points
	The higher education institution has adequate processes and procedures for the management of its quality assurance activities in place				2 points
	The higher education institution				1 point

	undertakes quality assurance of all its activities				
	The higher education institution gathers and uses appropriate data and information to improve its quality				2 points
	The higher education institution regularly reviews its quality assurance system for its effectiveness				2 points
3) Governance and Planning	The higher education institution operates on the basis of an effective governance structure.				<i>A maximum of 10 Points are assigned to this criterion</i> 2 points
	The higher education institution involves internal stakeholders into				2 points

	decision-making processes.				
	The governance (including composition of the governing body) and management structure is suitable for the institution in terms of size and nature (public or private).				1 point
	The institution has a set of principles, codes, or values that govern the institution.				1 point
	The institution has a qualified Vice-Chancellor, Rector, Dean, or a Director responsible for academic and financial matters.				1 point
	The decision-making bodies of the higher education institution are				1 point

	appropriately described in terms of their roles and responsibilities.				
	The decision-making processes in the higher education institution are undertaken in a transparent manner and adequately followed-up.				1 point
	The higher education institution ensures that external stakeholders have a role in the governance system.				1 point
4) Teaching and Learning	The higher education institution has an effective system for the design, approval, monitoring and review of its study				<p><i>A maximum of 20 Points are assigned to this criterion</i></p> <p>3 points</p>

	programme offered to check adherence to the standards for which accreditation was granted by MQA.				
	The higher education institution ensures that its study programmes address needs of the labour market.				2 points
	The higher education institution provides public information about its study programmes.				1 point
	The higher education institution ensures consistent student admissions, with adherence to MQA's Minimum Entry Criteria for MNQF Qualifications.				2 points

	The higher education institution systematically ensures the appropriate implementation of the credit system.				1 point
	The higher education institution ensures that the delivery modality of MQA accredited academic programmes is implemented appropriately.				2 points
	Students at the higher education institution have access to appropriate learning resources required for various delivery modalities.				1 point
	The higher education institution has an				1 point

	adequate policy on student assessment.				
	The institution provides constructive and timely feedback for students as an opportunity to improve by reflecting on their own learning.				1 point
	The medium of instruction of various academic programmes are relevant and delivered appropriately				1 point
	The institution informs students about programme/module objectives/learning outcomes, schedule of topics, methods of teaching, the types of assessments,				2 points

	weightage of assessments, timelines for assessments and issuing of results at the beginning of programmes.				
	The institution ensures that students are well informed of the codes of conduct for submission of assignments, project work, and for sitting examinations. The institution has disciplinary procedures in relation to malpractices such as copying, plagiarism, contract cheating and violation of codes of conduct.				2 points
	The institution has a system to ensure				1 point

	that all module and programme outcomes (including credit and contact hours) are obtained by students, before awarding respective qualifications.				
5) Staffing	The higher education institution employs a sufficient number of staff.				<i>A maximum of 10 Points are assigned to this criterion</i> 2 points
	The institution engages qualified staff for academic programmes, including those who can teach research methodology and undertake graduate supervision, if graduate level programmes are offered.				2 points

	All staff members provided with employment contracts in adherence to existing national laws and regulations.				2 points
	The higher education institution offers professional development options to its staff.				1 point
	The higher education institution has policies on staff appraisal, promotion, leave, rewards and recognition, grievances, teaching workload, teaching conduct, and dress codes.				3 points
6) Facilities and Resources	The higher education institution has				<i>A maximum of 15 Points are assigned to this criterion</i>

	sufficient financial resources for its operations.				2 points
	The higher education institution operates on the basis of an appropriate financial strategy.				1 point
	The higher education institution has an adequate accounting and auditing system in place.				1 point
	The higher education institution has adequate physical facilities and resources for a good learning inclusive environment and for its other activities.				2 points
	There are adequate				2 points

	technological facilities (hardware, software and technical staff) to facilitate learning.				
	There are adequate technological facilities for operational activities (e.g. staff and student record keeping).				1 point
	The institution plans and updates technology to ensure that technological infrastructure remains adequate to support its mission, operations, academic programmes, and student services.				1 point
	The institution provides relevant instructional				1 point

	support and training for academic and administrative staff and students in using technology driven systems and learning platforms related to academic programmes, student services, and institutional operations.				
	The existing facilities are safe and secure, and provide a conducive learning and working environment.				1 point
	The institution engages in multi-year financial planning. The financial planning is realistic, based on identified sources of revenue.				1 point

	The institution ensures the integrity of the finances through appropriate internal control mechanisms, risk assessment, and timely financial reporting to the governing body.				1 point
	The institution has sufficient and qualified staff who are available to handle its finances.				1 point
7) Research	The higher education institution has a research policy and strategy				<i>A maximum of 5 Points are assigned to this criterion</i> 1 point
	The institution has adequate and qualified staff to teach research methodology and to supervise graduate students. The institution has				2 points

	<p>guidelines for developing and approving research proposals, providing ethical reviews of proposed research, format/guidelines for writing thesis/dissertations, and a policy and procedure for evaluating the originality and quality of thesis/dissertations.</p>				
	<p>The higher education institution has adequate regulations relating to its research activities</p>				1 point
	<p>The higher education institution ensures that its research activities conform</p>				1 point

	to international standards				
8) Admission, Records & Support Services	The institution has a well-defined student recruitment and admission policy, with relevant procedures, that meet MQA's entry requirements.				<i>A maximum of 15 Points are assigned to this criterion</i> 1 point
	The institution clearly communicates the recruitment and admission policy, and procedures to all prospective students.				1 point
	The institution provides accurate and comprehensive information about fees, other financial obligations, and refund possibilities Through recruitment and admission policies.				1 point
	The institution has a published policy on granting advanced standing or transfer of credit.				1 point

	There is a secure and consistent mechanism to handle student application, making offers of admissions, and for payment of fees.				1 point
	The institution ensures that new students receive a good orientation or induction programme regarding the rules and regulations, facilities, teaching and assessment practices, and facilities available for them.				1 point
	The admission process identifies students who may need additional support.				1 point
	There is a system to maintain student records permanently, securely, and confidentially, that includes secure backup (regardless				1 point

	of printed or digital form records).				
	There is a designated person or unit charged with the responsibility for ensuring timely collection of student records, maintaining of records, and ensuring the credibility of the records.				1 point
	There are policies and procedures in place for releasing of student records and transcripts.				1 point
	The institution analyses and make available enrolment and graduation statistics, segregated by year, academic programs, level of qualifications, gender, and academic achievements.				1 point
	There is a set of co-curricular activities that are suitable for				1 point

	the socio-educational experience of students.				
	The institution provides appropriate academic advising to support student development and academic success.				1 point
	The institution provides financial support (under special circumstances), awards and scholarships.				1 point
	The institution provides opportunities for student leadership and contributing to institutional decision making and governance.				1 point

4. Overall rating

The total number of points is: XX

Points are converted into a star rating based on the following scales:

0-25 points: One star	25-50 points: Two stars	50-75 points: Three stars	75-90 Points: Four stars	90-100 points: Five stars
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Therefore, the Audit Panel assesses the overall performance of NAME OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION as corresponding to X stars.

Date

Name Reviewer 1 - Chair

Signature Reviewer 1 - Chair

Date

Name Reviewer 2

Signature Reviewer 2

Date

Name Reviewer 3

Signature Reviewer 3

Date

Name Reviewer 4

Signature Reviewer 4

Date

Name Reviewer 5

Signature Reviewer 5
