



**QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS AND ANALYSIS**

**GUIDELINE
ON CONDUCTING THEMATIC ANALYSES**

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Acronyms

- ASCAL – Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education
- ENQA – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- ESG – Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
- HEI – Higher Education Institution
- QA – Quality Assurance
- TA – Thematic Analysis

Introduction

In recent decades, quality assurance in higher education has evolved from a process primarily focused on the formal evaluation and accreditation of institutions and study programmes towards a more analytical, reflective, and improvement-oriented approach to the higher education system. In this context, thematic analyses have assumed an increasingly important role as an instrument for identifying trends, challenges, good practices, and development needs at both institutional and national levels (*Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2012*).

Thematic analyses constitute one of the most important mechanisms through which quality assurance agencies can transform the information collected during external evaluation processes into useful knowledge for policymaking, institutional development, and the improvement of quality assurance processes. Beyond their informative function, they contribute to strengthening transparency, increasing the credibility of accreditation processes, and promoting a culture of quality in higher education.

The importance of thematic analyses has also been clearly emphasized within the European quality assurance framework. *The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015)*, under Standard 3.4 “*Thematic Analysis*”, stipulate that quality assurance agencies should periodically publish reports describing and analysing the general findings of their external quality assurance activities. ESG further highlights that, during evaluation processes, agencies collect a considerable amount of information regarding institutions and study programmes, which can be used beyond a single evaluation procedure and serve as a basis for structured analyses at the system level. These analyses contribute to the reflection and improvement of quality assurance policies and processes within institutional, national, and international contexts.

Likewise, publications of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) have emphasized the growing importance of thematic analyses as an integral part of the activities of quality assurance agencies. In the report “*ESG 2015–2018 ENQA Agency Reports: Thematic Analysis*”, ENQA notes that thematic analyses are no longer limited to summarising recommendations from accreditation reports, but also include comparative analyses, studies on specific topics, stakeholder surveys, analyses of the impact of quality assurance processes, and joint research projects.

According to ENQA, thematic analyses help agencies better understand systemic developments in higher education, identify long-term trends, and support higher education institutions in addressing common challenges. They also serve as an instrument for increasing the impact of quality assurance processes beyond accreditation decision-making, orienting quality assurance towards continuous improvement and the strategic development of the higher education sector.

Within this framework, Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL) aims to institutionalise the process of conducting thematic analyses as an important instrument for:

- monitoring developments in the higher education system;
- identifying good practices and common challenges;
- assessing the impact of accreditation processes;
- strengthening internal and external quality assurance mechanisms;
- supporting policymaking and decision-making.

Conducting thematic analyses is of particular importance in the Albanian context, where institutional and programme accreditation processes have generated a broad database of information and evidence regarding the functioning, development, and challenges of higher education institutions. The systematic analysis of these data enables the identification of sectoral trends, structural issues, and priority areas for improvement. These guidelines aim to establish a standardised and sustainable approach for the planning, implementation, and publication of thematic analyses by ASCAL, in accordance with European quality assurance standards, international good practices, and the needs of the Albanian higher education system.

I. PURPOSE

These guidelines define the purpose, methodology, procedures, and institutional mechanisms for conducting thematic analyses by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASCAL), with the aim of developing a culture of quality, improving quality assurance processes, and supporting policymaking in higher education.

Through the systematic analysis of data and findings, thematic analyses contribute to the identification of developments, good practices, challenges, and issues of relevance to the higher education system, serving as an instrument for institutional reflection and continuous improvement.

II. DEFINITION OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is a systematic process of identifying, interpreting, and analysing findings, trends, and common patterns emerging from quality assurance processes in higher education. Thematic analysis is not limited solely to summarising findings from accreditation reports but aims to interpret them at the system level in order to identify structural developments, quality trends, and needs for improvement.

Within the framework of ASCAL's activities, thematic analyses are primarily based on:

- institutional and study programme external evaluation reports;
- accreditation decisions;
- monitoring and follow-up processes;

- statistical data on the higher education system;
- questionnaires and consultations with stakeholders;
- studies, surveys, and other supplementary sources.

III. TYPES OF THEMATIC ANALYSES

ASCAL may conduct several categories of thematic analyses:

- **Systematic analyses of quality assurance reports:** analyses based on institutional accreditation reports, study programme reports, monitoring reports, as well as experts' recommendations and findings;
- **Thematic analyses on specific issues:** analyses focusing on specific topics such as internationalisation, scientific research, teaching and learning, digitalisation, internal quality assurance, employability, academic mobility, student involvement in quality assurance, etc.;
- **Analyses on the impact of accreditation processes:** analyses aimed at assessing the impact of accreditation recommendations, improvements implemented by HEIs, the effectiveness of follow-up and monitoring processes, the impact of quality assurance on institutional development, etc.;
- **Analyses involving additional data collection:** ASCAL may conduct surveys, interviews, focus groups, international comparative analyses, and thematic studies in cooperation with partner institutions, etc.

IV. PLANNING OF THEMATIC ANALYSES

ASCAL prepares an annual plan for thematic analyses for the purpose of planning and coordinating the institution's analytical activities.

The annual plan may be reviewed and updated in cases where emerging issues or new priorities within the higher education system are identified.

V. EXPECTED RESULTS

Through thematic analyses, ASCAL aims to:

- strengthen the culture of quality;
- increase the impact of quality assurance;
- improve accreditation processes;
- identify priority developments within the system;
- support policymaking.

VI. PROCESS OF CONDUCTING THEMATIC ANALYSIS

VI.1. Identification of the topic

The selection of the topic is carried out by considering:

- ASCAL's strategic priorities;
- issues identified in accreditation reports;
- stakeholders' opinions;
- developments in higher education;
- the needs of governmental institutions.

The selection of the topic should also be aligned with ASCAL's annual plan for thematic analyses and other internal operational documents.

VI.2. Methodology

The methodology may include:

- content analysis of reports;
- statistical analysis;
- comparative analysis;
- qualitative methods;
- mixed methods.

The report should clearly explain the data sources, the analysed period, the sample, methodological limitations, etc.

VI.3. Analysis and interpretation

The analysis should:

- highlight the main trends;
- identify structural issues;
- compare institutional practices;
- interpret the impact of findings at the system level.

VI.4. Drafting of the report

The thematic analysis report may include, but not be limited to:

1. Introduction;
2. Purpose;
3. Methodology;
4. Analysis of findings;

5. Conclusions;
6. Recommendations;
7. Statistical data, etc.

VI.5. Consultation

The draft report may be presented to staff members and/or representatives of higher education institutions or other stakeholders, depending on the type of analysis, for the purpose of collecting comments on elements that may not have been included.

VI.6. Responsibility

The drafting, coordination, and processing of thematic analyses are carried out by the Statistics and Analysis Sector, which is responsible for the collection, administration, analysis, and interpretation of data related to quality assurance processes, as well as for the preparation of thematic analyses in support of institutional development and quality improvement in higher education. The Sector may cooperate, where appropriate, with other ASCAL structures, external experts, and partner institutions in conducting specific analyses.

VI.7. Approval

The thematic analysis is approved by the General Director of ASCAL in accordance with internal institutional procedures. The approval process aims to ensure institutional acknowledgment of the report's content without affecting the objectivity and outcomes of the analysis.

VI.8. Publication and dissemination

The report is published on ASCAL's official website and, depending on the topic of the analysis, may also be presented at conferences, seminars, consultation roundtables, activities with HEIs and institutional partners, etc.

VI.9. Feedback

Following the publication of the thematic analysis, it is recommended to collect feedback regarding the contribution and content of the thematic analysis in order to improve future analyses.

VII. ENTRY INTO FORCE AND REVIEW

This guideline enters into force upon approval by the General Director of ASCAL and may be periodically reviewed in accordance with developments in the national and European quality assurance framework.