QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

STRATEGIC PLAN

2026–2030

ASCAL

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I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Quality assurance in higher education is fundamental to the sustainable development of the higher education system and the fulfilment of its public mission. The quality of institutions and study programmes directly affects students' academic and professional education, the credibility of qualifications, the development of research and innovation, and higher education's contribution to the country's social, economic and cultural development. A functional and credible quality assurance system protects the interests of students and society, strengthens institutional accountability and supports the recognition and competitiveness of Albanian higher education nationally and internationally.

Higher education institutions, which bear primary responsibility for the quality of their academic provision, should develop functional internal quality assurance systems, collect and use reliable data, involve students and other stakeholders, and demonstrate that evaluation results lead to concrete improvements. External quality assurance complements this responsibility by providing independent, professional evaluation based on standards and evidence, ensuring public accountability and encouraging the continuous improvement of institutions and study programmes. In this context, external quality assurance cannot be confined to formally verifying compliance with standards. It should also contribute to building a sustainable quality culture.

Developments in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), internationalisation, new forms of teaching and learning, digitalisation and artificial intelligence require quality assurance processes to adapt. At the same time, demographic changes and the needs of society and the labour market increase the demand for high-quality, inclusive and outcome-oriented higher education. These developments require clear and proportionate evaluation processes that respect academic autonomy and rely on standards and credible evidence.

01 / INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In exercising its statutory functions, the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL) is responsible for evaluating and assuring quality in higher education in the Republic of Albania. ASCAL exercises this mandate independently, impartially, professionally and transparently, in accordance with national legislation, the Higher Education Quality Code, the regulatory and procedural instruments in force, and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Independence in developing and approving procedures, defining evaluation criteria and formats, selecting experts and determining the content of reports is fundamental to the credibility and integrity of external quality assurance processes.

The period 2026–2030 represents a new phase in ASCAL's institutional development. ASCAL's steps to revise procedures, improve the AMS electronic system, engage national and international experts, involve students and develop monitoring and feedback mechanisms have established a solid foundation for the Agency's further development. The period 2026–2030 calls for consolidating these steps, improving the consistency and effectiveness of evaluations, using data more systematically and strengthening human and technological capacity. Compliance with the ESG, full membership of ENQA and registration on EQAR are priorities for ASCAL's European recognition. This direction is complemented by the CHEA application process, cooperation with counterpart agencies and participation in international networks and projects.

The Strategic Plan 2026–2030 sets the objectives guiding ASCAL's development, linking its mission, vision and values to institutional needs and developments in higher education. It focuses on the quality of evaluation and monitoring processes, quality culture and participation, the use of evidence, digital transformation, international cooperation and institutional sustainability. The objectives will be implemented through annual activity plans specifying activities, responsibilities, resources, indicators and deadlines, while progress will be tracked through periodic monitoring and evaluation.

02 / METHODOLOGY

II. METHODOLOGY

The development of the Strategic Plan 2026–2030 followed an analytical and consultative approach, combining an assessment of ASCAL's institutional development with a review of national and European quality assurance requirements and internal discussions with Agency staff. The analytical findings, institutional data and experience gained through external quality assurance processes provided the basis for defining the Plan's priorities, objectives, measures and indicators.

The process comprised several main phases:

Phase I – Preparation

The preparatory phase defined the purpose, structure, areas of analysis and organisation of the Plan's development. It identified the main sources of information, the documents to be reviewed and the institutional issues requiring strategic attention.

Phase II – Situation analysis and institutional development

This phase focused on assessing ASCAL's situation and institutional development, including:

- reviewing the legal, regulatory and strategic framework for quality assurance;
- analysing developments and needs in the Albanian higher education system;
- assessing ESG requirements and the criteria and practices associated with ENQA and EQAR;
- assessing the functioning of procedures, instruments and the electronic process management system;
- analysing the Agency's human, financial and technological capacity;
- identifying strengths, areas for improvement, opportunities and risks.

The findings of this phase informed the identification of priority issues to be addressed during 2026–2030.

Phase III – Discussion and definition of strategic priorities

During this phase, the situation analysis findings were discussed with ASCAL staff to assess institutional needs and challenges, as well as opportunities to improve quality assurance processes. The discussions helped complete and refine the analysis and define institutional development priorities for the strategic period.

On this basis, the strategic objectives and corresponding measures were defined, taking into account ASCAL's statutory mandate, institutional capacity, the needs of the higher education system and the requirements for European alignment.

Phase IV – Review and finalisation of the Plan

The draft Plan underwent a review to verify coherence between the context, situation analysis, objectives and measures. This phase also examined the clarity of wording, the avoidance of overlap and the document's alignment with national and European quality assurance requirements.

The Plan is based on feasibility, measurability and accountability. It will be put into practice through annual activity plans, with progress tracked through periodic monitoring, annual evaluation, a mid-term evaluation and a final evaluation.

III. MISSION, VISION AND VALUES

MISSION

ASCAL's mission is to assure, evaluate, monitor and promote quality in higher education in the Republic of Albania through independent, impartial, professional, transparent and proportionate processes based on standards and verifiable evidence, protecting students' interests, encouraging the continuous improvement of institutions and study programmes, and supporting the full integration of the Albanian system into the European Higher Education Area.

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ASCAL seeks to consolidate its position as an independent, credible, professional and transparent agency, recognised at European and international level, which applies the best standards and practices of external quality assurance, supports its own development through continuous improvement, innovation and decision-making based on data and analysis, promotes a quality culture, protects students' interests and contributes to the development of a competitive, inclusive higher education system integrated into the European Higher Education Area.

03 / VALUES

3.1 Values

In exercising its statutory mandate and developing external quality assurance processes, ASCAL is guided by the following institutional principles and values:

Independence and impartiality

Developing and implementing procedures, selecting experts and preparing evaluation reports independently, objectively and free from inappropriate influence.

Integrity and avoidance of conflicts of interest

Respecting ethical standards and applying mechanisms to declare, prevent and address conflicts of interest at every stage of the process.

Professionalism and responsibility

Exercising responsibilities competently, diligently, objectively and within established deadlines, ensuring the quality and consistency of processes and reports.

Transparency and accountability

Providing complete, accurate, up-to-date and accessible information on standards, procedures, decisions and evaluation results, while respecting legal restrictions on the publication of information.

Confidentiality and data protection

Safeguarding information handled during processes and using it solely for evaluation purposes, in accordance with confidentiality, personal data protection and information security requirements.

Objectivity and evidence-based decision-making

Basing evaluations, findings and recommendations on defined standards, reliable data and documented, verifiable evidence.

Consistency and proportionality

Applying standards and procedures consistently, while adapting the focus and intensity of evaluation and monitoring to the nature, complexity and risk level of each case.

Participation and inclusion

Ensuring meaningful participation by students, higher education institutions, experts and other stakeholders, while respecting each actor's roles and responsibilities.

Continuous improvement

Using evaluation, monitoring, feedback, analytical and self-assessment results to improve ASCAL's processes and promote a quality culture in higher education.

IV. LEGAL, REGULATORY AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

4.1 National framework

ASCAL's activities and strategic direction are grounded in the legal and regulatory framework in force. The main instruments defining the Agency's mandate, organisation, procedures, transparency and accountability are:

- Law No. 80/2015 “On higher education and scientific research in higher education institutions in the Republic of Albania”, as amended;
- Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 109, dated 15 February 2017, “On the organisation and functioning of the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education and the Accreditation Board and the setting of fees for quality assurance processes in higher education”, as amended;
- Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 824, dated 24 December 2021, “On the approval of the Higher Education Quality Code”, as amended;
- Law No. 44/2015 “Code of Administrative Procedures of the Republic of Albania”;
- Law No. 119/2014 “On the right to information”, as amended, and ASCAL's Transparency Programme;
- Law No. 124/2024 “On personal data protection”, and its implementing secondary legislation;
- Legislation in force on cybersecurity, archives, electronic documents and financial administration rules, insofar as they relate to ASCAL's activities;
- ASCAL's Internal Regulation, the Accreditation Board Regulation, the Manual on evaluation and accreditation procedures, and other internal policies, codes and procedures.

4.2 European and international framework

At European level, the document is guided by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), ENQA membership requirements, EQAR registration requirements and Albania's commitments within the EHEA. Compliance with the ESG and cyclical external review underpin ASCAL's European strategic priority. Cooperation with CHEA and other international networks complements this direction by expanding professional exchange, partnerships and international recognition.

V. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES

01

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1

Consolidating a proportionate external quality assurance system oriented towards continuous improvement.

This objective aims to increase the credibility, consistency and effectiveness of evaluation and monitoring, in accordance with the national framework and the ESG. It includes reviewing standards following the approval of the revised ESG, improving procedures and instruments, preparing and engaging experts, reviewing the post-accreditation monitoring methodology and clarifying complaints and appeals mechanisms, in support of continuous quality improvement.

02

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2

Strengthening quality culture and the participation of students and stakeholders

This objective aims to develop a quality culture and the active, inclusive participation of students and stakeholders. It includes supporting internal quality systems through training, guidance and the exchange of practices; preparing and representing students; involving employers and other stakeholders through consultation; reviewing and developing the National Student Survey and using its results; and organising the Annual Quality Conference as a space for dialogue. These commitments support continuous improvement while respecting HEIs' primary responsibility for quality.

V. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES

03

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3

Developing analytical capacity and evidence-based decision-making

This objective aims to analyse and systematically use data to identify trends, systemic challenges and good practices in higher education. It includes preparing and publishing thematic and statistical analyses of evaluation, monitoring and survey results, the effects of recommendations and developments in higher education; administering feedback instruments and analysing stakeholder contributions; and using findings to guide planning and decision-making and to define and track improvement measures.

04

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4

Digital transformation and information security

This objective aims to modernise digital systems and technological infrastructure for more efficient administration, traceability and reporting of ASCAL's processes. It includes maintaining and developing AMS, supporting monitoring, automating reporting and gradually enabling interoperability with public systems; updating equipment and security measures, assessing risks and ensuring system continuity; and examining opportunities and defining rules for the responsible use of artificial intelligence, with human oversight, verification of outputs and respect for confidentiality and data protection.

V. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES

05

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5

European alignment and expanding international cooperation

This objective aims to consolidate compliance with the ESG and expand ASCAL's international recognition and cooperation. It includes preparing documentation and pursuing full ENQA membership, EQAR registration and an application to CHEA; addressing recommendations from international reviews; participating in international networks and activities; and developing projects, new applications and partnerships with counterpart agencies, using the experience gained to improve the institution.

06

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 6

Strengthening governance and institutional capacity

This objective aims to consolidate ASCAL's governance, effective functioning and sustainability while preserving institutional independence and integrity. It includes staff professional development through training and knowledge sharing; improving internal quality policy and practices, self-assessment and the use of feedback; publishing clear and accessible information and adapting communication to the needs of students, HEIs and the public; and planning and managing human and financial resources, infrastructure and working conditions to implement priorities and ensure continuity of activities.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND REVIEW

6.1 Annual planning and resources

The Strategic Plan is implemented through annual activity plans. Each year, the activities contributing to the strategic objectives and measures, responsible units, deadlines and indicators are defined. Planning draws on institutional capacity, the Medium-Term Budget Programme and annual budget, as well as opportunities offered by projects and technical assistance.

Specific activity deadlines are set and updated in annual plans. International processes follow the requirements and schedules of the respective organisations. Digitalisation, inclusion, independence, integrity and sustainability are taken into account in implementing all objectives.

6.1 Tracking results

The responsible units track and document the implementation of activities in the annual activity plans and report their contribution to achieving the strategic objectives. Progress in implementing the Plan is assessed through the following mechanisms:

Monitoring mechanism	Content
Annual reporting and evaluation	Assessing results against annual planning and using findings to set priorities for the following year.
Mid-term evaluation – 2028	Reviewing progress towards strategic objectives, resources and risks to identify necessary adjustments for 2029–2030.
Final evaluation – 2030	Assessing achievement of the objectives, results and their sustainability, and identifying lessons and priorities for the next strategic period.

Monitoring and evaluation findings are used to improve implementation of the Plan and adapt annual planning to institutional needs and legal and technological developments. Where the Strategic Plan requires revision, changes are documented and approved in accordance with the relevant procedures, maintaining alignment with ASCAL's mission and objectives.