International Quality Review

POLIS University

Contents

About this review

This is a report of an International Quality Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at POLIS University. The review took place from 2 to 4 May 2023 and was conducted virtually by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

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- Abraham Baldry (student reviewer).

The QAA Officer for this review was Ian Welch.

International Quality Review (IQR) offers institutions outside the UK the opportunity to have a review by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The review benchmarks institutions' quality assurance processes against international quality assurance standards set out in Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

In International Quality Review, the QAA review team:

- makes conclusions against each of the 10 standards set out in Part 1 of the ESG
- makes conditions (if relevant)
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- comes to an overall conclusion as to whether the institution meets the standards for International Quality Review.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section: Key findings. The section Explanations of the findings provides the detailed commentary.

The QAA website gives more information about QAA and its mission. A dedicated section explains the method for International Quality Review and has links to other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the Glossary at the end of this report.

Key findings

Executive summary

POLIS University (POLIS) is a non-state-funded higher education institution in Albania. It was established in 2006, but its origin dates back to 1996 with the establishment of Co-Plan – Institute of Habitat Development. By early 2000, Co-Plan established its own 'Training and Exchange Centre' which by 2006 was further extended into the establishment of the higher education institution - POLIS International School of Architecture and Urban Development Policies. Since 2007, a new entity - an architecture and planning bureau was established. These three units, while legally and financially independent, work very closely to create synergies and a significant pool of expertise in their inherent fields of interest in education, civic society and industry. In this context, POLIS is one of the few non-state HEIs in Albania that was built on two components: that of quality education and applied research supported by Co-Plan.

The vision of POLIS is to provide excellence in the education of professionals and scientific researchers capable of addressing the needs of the market and society in areas of interest at home and abroad.

POLIS has the following main objectives:

- to provide students with professional leadership qualities in areas covered by it, in order to exert influence for a positive development of the country and the region
- to provide students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills according to the highest contemporary standards, aiming their integration in the domestic and international labour market
- to carry out study, research, scientific and practical activities closely related to its respective academic activities and research programmes
- to serve innovation in areas where it extends its activity and influence developments in the region regarding these areas.

POLIS aims to become a regional platform and reference point in the Balkans and the Adriatic and Ionian region.

The Statute of POLIS University details the mission as: 'to create, transmit, develop and protect knowledge through teaching, research and innovation as defined in its registration act. The complete mission of the institution is articulated in the form of goals and aims as defined in the Statute, Article 3'.

The fundamental objectives of the POLIS mission are:

- to create, develop, transmit and protect knowledge through teaching, scientific and applied research as well as innovation
- to educate top specialists and prepare young scientists in the fields of design, architecture and engineering, sciences of territory, management and policy development
- to deliver diploma studies at the professional level, bachelor's, master's and doctorate in the areas stated above
- to offer the possibility of vocational training and lifelong learning
- to integrate teaching with research
- to contribute through education, scientific and applied research as well as innovation in the economic, social and cultural development of the country

- to contribute for the internationalisation of higher education and science in the country through regional, European and international cooperation.

POLIS offers education in four levels (EQF 5-8). It currently delivers two post-secondary professional programmes, five bachelor's programmes, 10 master's programmes and one PhD programme. They are all full-time programmes except for two part-time professional master's programmes. POLIS also provides life-long learning courses and training. The bachelor's and some of the master's programmes are taught in Albanian while the Executive Master and PhD programme are taught in English.

POLIS University has a clear focus on a number of disciplines: for instance, architecture, planning and design, civil engineering, environmental science, computer science as well as entrepreneurship and innovation. It is the intention of the University to maintain this focused profile and develop vertically by developing targeted master's and PhD studies rather than to branch out into other areas of study.

POLIS University is engaged with a number of significant scientific research and international projects, supported by a range of local, regional and international partnerships, for instance the Joint Executive Master in Restoration, Revitalisation and Valorisation of the Cultural Heritage (in partnership with the University of Ferrara, Italy) and the International PhD programme in Architecture and Urban Planning (in partnership with the University of Ferrara, Italy).

POLIS employs about 200 academic staff (out of which 108 are full time) and about 40 support staff; 25-30% of the staff are foreign citizens. Currently POLIS has an overall population of over 1,300 students (in all programmes) and grows with roughly 300 students per annum. The overall alumni community of POLIS to date is over 2,000 graduates.

In reaching conclusions about the extent to which POLIS meets the 10 ESG Standards, the QAA review team followed the evidence-based review procedure as outlined in the handbook for International Quality Review (June 2021). The University provided the review team with a self-evaluation and supporting evidence. The review visit was conducted virtually. This is because the University has undergone a successful institutional accreditation against national standards in 2017 with QAA, and this review was regarded as a re-accreditation so did not require a face-to-face visit. The goal this time is to measure the quality of the academic and scientific activity against European standards and increase the image and visibility beyond national borders. During the review visit, which took place from 2 to 4 May 2023, the review team held a total of seven meetings with the Head of Institution, senior management team, academic staff, professional support staff, students, alumni and external stakeholders. The review team also had the opportunity to observe the University's facilities and learning resources through a virtual tour and through a demonstration of the University data management system.

In summary, the team found six examples of good practice and was able to make some recommendations for improvement/enhancement. The recommendations are of a desirable rather than essential nature and are proposed to enable the University to build on existing practice which is operating satisfactorily but which could be improved or enhanced. The team identified one condition that the University must satisfy to achieve QAA accreditation.

Overall, the team concluded that POLIS **meets** all the standards for International Quality Review **subject to meeting specific conditions**. The review team has identified one condition, six areas of good practice and 12 recommendations.

In accordance with the published IQR handbook, the review process was extended to allow POLIS University to meet the condition, and for the review team to confirm that it has done so successfully.

POLIS University provided an action plan within four weeks after receiving the draft report. This was required to address the specific condition set by the review team, as well as respond to any other recommendations and set out any plans to capitalise on any good practice identified.

The published IQR methodology requires that once the institution has completed the necessary actions and submitted relevant evidence to QAA, a follow-up desk-based analysis will be undertaken to determine whether the institution has now satisfied the conditions set and consequently meets the IQR standards. A report recommending whether to revise or retain the original outcome will then be submitted to the Accreditation Panel for a final decision.

In accordance with the published IQR methodology, POLIS University submitted further evidence in November 2023. Initial scrutiny by a team at QAA recognised that the University had strengthened its internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi are set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated. With this in mind, the report was amended and forwarded to the original review team for their consideration and comment - with a proposal that the University had met the condition.

The review team acknowledged the significant amount of work undertaken by the University in order to meet this standard more fully. In particular, the team was clear that the University had worked to strengthen its internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi are set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated.

The review team noted that this had been achieved by establishing a commission in each of the University's faculties to conduct a review of the regulation of study programmes, paying particular attention to the revision of intended learning outcomes and their alignment with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and that this initial stage was followed by training sessions for academic staff to revise the syllabi in order to align them with the revised intended learning outcomes.

The team noted that new syllabi are subject to a consistency check by Heads of Department, who focus on objectives, content, methodology and assessment criteria before it is uploaded to the University virtual learning environment for presentation to students.

In view of the action plan and subsequent additional evidence presented against the condition set against Standard 1.9, the review team considered that the condition had been addressed and the Standard 1.9 is now met at a threshold level. The review team recommended that further work should be done to embed internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi continue to be set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated so as to support teaching, learning and assessment activities, and that they align with EQF. Actions against all recommendations will be further considered at the mid-cycle review stage.

These revised outcomes were ratified by the IQR Accreditation panel in December 2023 who confirmed that the condition in Standard 1.9 has been addressed and therefore all 10 ESG standards are **met**.

QAA's conclusions about POLIS University

The QAA review team reached the following conclusions about the higher education provision at POLIS University.

European Standards and Guidelines

POLIS University meets nine of the 10 ESG Standards and Guidelines. The Standard not fully met is:

- ESG Standard 1.9: Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes.

POLIS University therefore meets the requirements for International Quality Review subject to meeting one condition set out below.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at POLIS University:

- the formal approach taken by the institution to actively support non-discriminatory practices, understanding that the emphasis the University places is fairly unique in the cultural context it embodies (ESG Standard 1.1)

- the involvement of students in programme design (ESG Standard 1.2)

- the approach taken by the University to nurture student progression through the maintenance of a culture of student and teacher partnership (ESG Standard 1.3)

- the participatory approach that aligns research objectives and institutional objectives (ESG Standard 1.5)

- the extensive range of learning resources that support learning, in particular the special IT facilities to enhance the learning opportunities for students with disabilities (ESG Standard 1.6)

- the comprehensive range of specialist facilities on offer which enhance the professional learning opportunities for students (ESG Standard 1.6).

Conditions

The QAA review team identified the following **condition** that must be fulfilled before all of the European Standards and Guidelines can be deemed fully met at POLIS University. The condition must be addressed within 12 months.

- The review team sets the condition that the University strengthens internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi are set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated so as to support teaching, learning and assessment activities and that they align with the European Qualifications framework within 12 months (ESG Standard 1.9).

Following POLIS University's further submission in November 2023, the review team confirmed that the condition in Standard 1.9 has been addressed and therefore Standard 1.9 is **met**.

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to POLIS University:

- strengthen the links between the quality assurance policy and the cross-institutional implementation of the strategic plan to support their alignment (ESG Standard 1.1)

- provide regular formal opportunities for all categories of stakeholders to engage with quality assurance processes and ensure any informal communication is captured formally so that actions can be considered and the feedback loop closed (ESG Standard 1.1)

- amend course documentation to ensure course specifications formulate explicit learning outcomes with direct reference to educational levels on the European Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Framework (ESG Standard 1.2)

- formalise an approach to the setting, moderation and marking of assessments, which can actively involve discipline-level expertise alongside quality management verification (ESG Standard 1.3)

- ensure appropriate resources are assigned to support the ongoing operation of the Digital Management Plan and establish appropriate staff training (ESG Standard 1.4)

- amend opportunities for continuous professional development for all teaching staff to emphasise distinctions between EQF levels (ESG Standard 1.5)

- complete the work that sets out measures to promote inclusiveness that are a result of participation in the IDEA project, particularly in the context of learning and teaching practices, access to student support and how course leadership responds to students' needs in the Student Guide and website (ESG Standard 1.6)

- establish a recognised process for the Student Registry Office to formally communicate with academic staff the details of students with disabilities (ESG Standard 1.6)

- develop clear stipulations for ongoing monitoring of data to guarantee its reliability and indicate what data is worth collecting according to its usefulness (ESG Standard 1.7)

- amend the student guide to include detailed information that governs the student journey to comprehensively inform students about their academic responsibilities and opportunities (ESG Standard 1.8)

- further develop and formalise processes for ongoing monitoring activities to ensure feedback can be actioned in a timely, relevant and systematic manner (ESG Standard 1.9)

- embed internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi continue to be set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated so as to support teaching, learning and assessment activities and that they align with the European Qualifications Framework (ESG Standard 1.9).

Explanation of the findings about POLIS University

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a brief glossary at the end of this report. A fuller glossary of terms is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the review method, also on the QAA website.

Standard 1.1   Policy for quality assurance

Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

Findings

1.1   As a private institution, POLIS functions legally as a registered company. The University has a policy for quality assurance; however, academically it is accountable to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES) as per the Higher Education Law in Albania. As such, the MES regulates quality matters at the University, such as admission quotas, staff-student ratio and staff appointments, and approves key documents which guide University strategic and operational developments, including the Statute of POLIS University.

1.2   The review team tested the effectiveness of the University's policy for quality assurance through the analysis of documentation provided by the institution, and through meeting with a range of stakeholders.

1.3   The Statute of POLIS University details 'the vision and mission of POLIS University, its principles and functioning, authorities and governing bodies with their competencies, organization of teaching and scientific activities, financial and administrative, procedures - starting with the admission up to the graduation of students, the hierarchy of the academic and administrative personnel, their rights and obligations, as well as the students' rights and responsibilities'. However, the review team found that the mission is not explicitly provided, and was paraphrased to be focused on 'activities of education, scientific and applied as well as innovation in its areas of interest'. The review team further probed the definitive formulation for the mission and was supplied with the Court decision where the mission is listed as: 'POLIS University's mission is to create, transmit, develop and protect knowledge through teaching, research and innovation as defined in its registration act. The complete mission of the institution is articulated in the form of goals and aims as defined in the Statute, Article 3'. The review team found that whereas the self-evaluation document (SED) contains multiple references to the mission and various explanatory paraphrasing, it does not make use of the mission statement per se, nor do any of the other documents supplied. As the mission statement is designed to guide all University activity, the review team finds it important that it is promoted with regularity and consistency to all its stakeholders as a statement they can associate with, rather than its interpretations.

1.4   The Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU), which operates under the Rector's responsibility and is regulated by the provisions of the Internal Statute of the University, governs the quality assurance activity at the University. IQAU is responsible for periodical evaluations of the educational process and the effectiveness of teaching and research activities. Reports are generated which are presented to the Academic Senate and the offices of the Rector and the Deans of Faculties. The Senate also votes on recommendations made by the IQAU and their implementation. The membership of the IQAU includes an external consultant alongside teaching staff, administrative staff and students. The University has confirmed that there is no external consultative body; however, in time, the University has drawn on expertise of some individual consultants for specific matters such as accreditation on research.

1.5   The University supplied as evidence the Rules and Regulations of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit which covers the duties and responsibilities of IQAU, the basic principles for operation and the composition details. These regulations also serve as Terms of Reference for the Unit, as the University confirmed no other Terms of Reference are issued. The review

team was also presented with the Internal Quality Assurance Policy/Strategy 2023-2027, which sets out strategy directions and action lines for quality assurance for the specified period. This document includes the principles which underpin quality assurance at the University, the objectives for internal quality assurance arrangements, and the methodological details for 'quality review' which it identifies as being 'the main procedure and mechanism for the quality assessment both at institutional level or for the study programs'. In Appendix 1, the document contains an action plan for the implementation of the policy elements. Whereas, it could be considered helpful to have this information in one place, the merging of the policy with a strategic action plan for its implementation across specified years may have the potential to be confusing.

1.6   During the review visit, the review team explored how the IQAU policy/strategy and its corresponding processes were being used in strategic decision-making and sought to have examples which could demonstrate all stages of the quality cycle, from planning, implementation, monitoring, review and feedback to stakeholders who had contributed efforts to these processes. The review team noted that the synergies between the institutional strategic directions (not exclusively on quality assurance) and the quality assurance actions promoted by the IQAU policy document are insufficiently strong. When the review team probed how the outcomes from IQAU activities inform strategic directions, the responses received did not indicate that there was a direct link between IQAU data collection, analysis and reporting and strategic institutional decision-making, presenting a potential risk to the achievement of some of the strategic ambitions of the University. The review team **recommends** that the University might consider strengthening the links between the quality assurance policy and the cross-institutional implementation of the strategic plan.

1.7   One of the ambitions which senior management staff repeatedly referred to is the achievement of joint or double degree arrangements for all master's level programmes. While the review team was told of two joint programmes that had not survived due to changing legislative regimes, there remain two such programmes currently running: the Joint Executive Master in Restoration, Revitalisation and Valorisation of the Cultural Heritage (in partnership with the University of Ferrara, Italy) and the International PhD programme in Architecture and Urban Planning (in partnership with the University of Ferrara, Italy). The latter is a joint PhD programme and is the only internationally accredited PhD programme in Albania. The review team found that due consideration is given to the resourcing of international initiatives and that while direct reference in the evidence to risk assessment is not explicitly considered, the Consortium agreement and the arrangements for governance indicate that assessment of risk is inherent in the management of the partnerships.

1.8   The review team probed if benchmarking was a priority for the University as part of its quality assurance arrangements and found that for research activities targets were set for comparison, which was referred to as a benchmark. The University's Development Strategy objectives highlight priorities to advance research and professional practice relevant to national needs, including benchmarking programmes with similar programmes abroad. In addition, the University has established a process of evaluating the scientific research of individual staff using an internally developed benchmarking system which scores each staff member's patents, project leadership, publications (whether published nationally or internationally) and thesis supervision.

1.9   Non-discriminative provisions are part of the Labour Code in Albania, hence a requirement for the University. However, the University notes that its commitment goes beyond the provision of equal opportunities to all students and staff, via its Gender Equality Plan, which is noted to cover more than strictly non-discriminatory practices as it looks at other aspects such as work/life balance or balanced research groups. The review team probed if there is any real or perceived discrimination which stakeholders might be subject to

and what measures of protection are in place to avoid any form of bias and to promote gender equality. Staff and students confirmed that POLIS commitment is visible in employment, promotion, admission, and examination practices, respectively, with this process being observed as transparent and clear, and displaying attention to gender. The review team considers the formal approach taken by the institution to actively support non-discriminatory practices is a feature of **good practice**, understanding that the emphasis the University places is fairly unique in the cultural context it embodies.

1.10 Students confirmed that they are engaged in providing feedback via the student surveys which seek their opinions on courses completed; the University also indicated the existence of the Student Senate, composed of five elected members and is organised around both academic and extracurricular activities.

1.11 Teachers indicated that feedback for proposed developments generally happens through departmental discussions and/or with the Deans, and action would be taken accordingly. Course changes operationalised through an updated syllabus can occur annually and will be taken forward by teachers themselves as long as they remain minor changes. The Head of Department and the Dean identify all changes through the formal approval of all syllabi before the start of each academic year; however, it was unclear to the review team if a change log is in place to collect minor changes for formal consideration and what the teacher involvement might be for a more major curriculum review.

1.12 The University frequently refers to its engagement with the labour market and its attempts to keep abreast of developments which could serve their students well in individual study fields. IQAU has nine members, including one student and one external representative and one alumni representative. The University states that while it has no established external consultative body it draws on one external representative for regular consultation and a second external representative who is contracted to offer advice on research matters. Employers whom the review team met confirmed they were not on any committees and had not been formally engaged in any discussions about programme developments; however, some had been contacted informally. The University also confirmed that employers were not routinely surveyed for their views. In addition, while alumni surveys are in place, the alumni confirmed they preferred to get involved via more dynamic activities on campus and rarely complete the survey. Both graduates and industry representatives referred to informal arrangements with direct contacts as being the prevailing mechanism by which they get involved with the activities of the University. The review team, therefore, finds that although the University endeavours to engage a number of stakeholders, the coverage and impact of this engagement is variable. Thus, engagement needs to become more formalised and more systematic, with monitoring tools in place to ensure it is rendering benefits for the institution. The review team also probed how the feedback loop might be closed on actions completed based on suggestions made from stakeholders and found that this too was variable, with mass email communication being the prime tool and many stakeholders unaware what the consequences of their feedback might have been. The review team **recommends** that the University provide regular formal opportunities for all categories of stakeholders to engage with quality assurance processes and ensure any informal communication is captured formally so that actions can be considered and the feedback loop closed.

1.13 The review team concludes that, overall, the University has a policy for quality assurance and that some internal stakeholders develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders, although this is inconsistent. While there is a recommendation under this Standard, it does not represent any serious risk to the management of the Standard. The review team concludes that the Standard is **met**.

Standard 1.2   Design and approval of programmes

Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Findings

2.1   Polis University has a range of processes to ensure effective programme design and approval. New programmes are created through a 'bottom up' process, whereby new programmes originate with a department and proceed through approval at various levels in the institution.

2.2   The University has created a number of higher degree programmes to enable students to progress from undergraduate to postgraduate studies at the same institution. New programmes are subject to approval by faculty and academic senate, where programmes are formally discussed, as well as at external validation with partners in the case of joint programmes.

2.3   The University explained that study programmes offered by POLIS are compiled, structured and conducted according to the Bologna system and with a clear reference both to the Qualification Framework of the European Higher Education Area and Albanian Qualification Framework. The intended learning outcomes are provided as part of the programmes' descriptions, elaborated as a result of market studies for each study programme.

2.4   New programmes are designed in consultation with staff, students, and external stakeholders and undergo a two-part process. Firstly, the institution conducts market research to ensure social and industrial relevance. This includes research on demographics, businesses, education opportunities, as well as a range of other relevant information to support the business case for creating a new programme. The institution also consults with alumni, formally through alumni boards and informally through proactive communication.

2.5   The second part of the process involves an analysis of curriculum, learning outcomes, knowledge, competencies, abilities, before final approval of new programmes by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, which confirms market relevance, as well as verifying that the curriculum is well designed, and that the institution has capacity and resources to deliver the programme to a high standard and on an ongoing basis.

2.6   Student representatives are also involved in programme design through the student representation scheme and, at a later stage, through their membership of the University's Senate, where they account for 16% of the committee's membership. The team considers that the involvement of students in programme design is **good practice**.

2.7   The design and approval of joint and double degree programmes are the result of a shared process among the partner institutions. The University explained that this can entail a more complex process in some instances to identify relevant research topics (where appropriate) and reconcile the legal requirements in respective countries while ensuring programme quality and impact.

2.8   Each programme is continuously revised at department level and faculty level, and is then subject to approval by the Academic Senate. These revisions are informed by feedback received from current students, former students through the alumni network, and suggestions from international partners and other external groups. These inputs are received in a formal and informal manner through evaluation forms or reports.

2.9   The review team evaluated the effectiveness of POLIS University's approach to the design and approval of programmes through discussions with faculty, staff and students during a virtual site visit, and by scrutinising a wide range of institutional policy and procedure documents, reports and records of meetings.

2.10   Programme documents set out admission criteria, prerequisites, selection, objectives, credits, working hours, rights and obligations of students, the duration of the programme and a range of other information. Programme specifications provide breakdowns of credits, lectures and seminars. Students met by the review team advised that they received this information in a timely fashion. Each regulation of study programme articulates broad intended learning outcomes; however, the course documents provided did not contain detailed information about specific learning outcomes that the courses were designed to ensure for students and did not make clear how courses are taught to meet the relevant European Qualifications Framework levels. The ESG standard specifies that the qualification resulting from a programme should refer to the correct level of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. The review team **recommends** that the University amend course documentation to ensure course specifications clearly formulate explicit learning outcomes with direct reference to educational levels on the European Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Framework.

2.11   POLIS University has processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes are designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The involvement of students in programme design is regarded by the review team as **good practice**. The qualification resulting from a programme is clearly specified and communicated, although it is not clear how courses are taught to meet the relevant European Qualifications Framework levels. While there is a recommendation under this Standard, it does not represent any serious risk to the management of this Standard. The review team concludes that the Standard is **met**.

Standard 1.3   Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

Findings

3.1   Students at POLIS University are represented in various governing bodies, such as the Academic Senate and the Internal Quality Assurance Unit. In addition, there is a student representative scheme, and a student senate which the University has financed and which is focused on encouraging student academic and extra-academic activities. Students are also represented on the University Senate.

3.2   The University made use of Moodle during the COVID-19 pandemic which enabled students to maintain their engagement with the University through remote learning; however, since the end of COVID restrictions its use has subsided, in part owing to regulations governing remote tuition in Albania.

3.3   The University provides a range of support to students. Detailed information for students is provided in the orientation session including information about how study programmes are organised, their duration, the division of subjects into modules, types of training activities, the concept of ECTS credits, forms of theoretical and practical learning, forms of knowledge control, learning development and follow-up. The University's various academic and administrative units provide ongoing support, and there are specific units dedicated to helping students with career counselling and alumni networking and engagement. There is a tutorial system in place to provide individualised academic support to students as needed.

3.4   The review team evaluated the effectiveness of POLIS University's approach to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment through discussions with faculty, staff and students during a virtual site visit, and by scrutinising a wide range of institutional policy and procedure documents, reports and records of meetings.

3.5   Students met by the review team were happy with the content of their programmes, the variety of electives, the ways in which student feedback was taken on board, the opportunities for exchange with other institutions, and the teachers' approach to grading and marking work. Students described how they take an active role in creating the learning process through the range of pedagogical approaches adopted by staff who tailor their delivery to the course objectives and involve students through proactive activities and live projects, such as Connect IT, which is a project piloted with the support of the European Union with the aim to harness initiatives developed by IT students to support the digitisation of work processes of SME enterprises in Albania.

3.6   Teaching staff develop their skills through engagement with a number of Erasmus CBHE projects such as CONSUS/DRIVE/VTECH, and through the DRIVE project (led by POLIS University as coordinator and grant holder) which highlights 18 new teaching methodologies that adopt the 'problem-based learning' approach and has been piloted in six Higher Education Institutions in Albania and Kosovo. The impact of this activity is recorded in student evaluations.

3.7   Students described teachers as supportive, accessible and informed, and noted that they were generous with their time and eager to work with students to enable their progression. Student satisfaction is assessed through numerous questionnaires. The results from student evaluations are discussed with staff as part of their annual appraisal process

and impact on staff development. The approach taken by the University to nurture student progression through the maintenance of a culture of student and teacher partnership is identified as **good practice** by the review team.

3.8   The University has a Code of Ethics and there are some policies on marking. However, the University does not make use of marking rubrics, which set out a standard set of criteria for marking assessments. It thus may be difficult to ensure consistency across professors, courses, and programmes.

3.9   The Code of Ethics clearly defines plagiarism. The University uses Turnitin to help detect plagiarism or lack of transparency in the use of referenced material used in assessments. Assignments are either submitted only electronically or both in hard copy and electronic version following student self-assessment. Electronic checks are conducted to detect plagiarism and students are subject to disciplinary actions if found to have breached the Code of Ethics. The team heard that this contributes to the quality of the students' work through the process of reflection prior to submitting the final material, which enables students to take an active role in their assessment. This self-reflective approach is observed in regular presentations of student design work in practical or visual areas. These presentations are frequent and public in an environment supervised by teachers and involving other students.

3.10   The research community of POLIS is required to abide by the Code of Conduct and Research Ethics in addition to the outputs of students (papers, master thesis, PhD dissertations) being subjected to Turnitin checks. The review team recognised that this is a positive development.

3.11   Each course syllabus explains the academic evaluation system. Each subject has its own specifics and requirements and all the evaluation components and their specific weight in the final evaluation are specified in the syllabus. The importance of the student role and responsibilities in evaluation are further emphasised in the Didactic Regulations and Code of Ethics. Teaching staff met by the review team confirmed that the University does not make use of external examiners, second marking or moderation. There is an appeals process which sets out students' rights to seek redress in the event they do not agree with the result of an assessment. Students can either request to re-sit one assessment per academic year, gaining the opportunity to improve a mark, or, in the event that students believe their work has been mis-marked because of mismanagement of process, can make an academic appeal against their grade, which will be evaluated by the Dean. However, some students met by the review team were not clear that they could make an academic appeal. The review team **recommends** that the University formalise its approach to the setting, moderation and marking of assessments, which can actively involve discipline-level expertise alongside quality management verification**.** The review team considers that the benefit of this would be to ensure consistency of standards in the setting and marking of assessments by all students.

3.12   The review team concludes that POLIS University programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students largely reflects this approach. While there is a recommendation under this Standard, it does not represent any serious risk to the management of this Standard. The review team concludes that the Standard is **met**.

Standard 1.4   Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life cycle', for example student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Findings

4.1   The University sets out its admissions policy and application process in Chapter IV of the Didactic Regulations and the accredited programmes on offer are made public on its website in advance of the admissions cycle. The Academic Senate has oversight of the admissions criteria and recruitment target for each programme and the selection process is informed by in-person interviews and tests. Tests are not mandatory though serve as a ranking tool. For transparency reasons, applicants are ranked in accordance to the admissions criteria at the end of each admissions cycle and lists are made public at the University and on its website.

4.2   Recruitment is supported through published material on the University's website, social media and a number of open days which offer applicants the opportunity to view the University's modern facilities, gain information about the programmes of study, scholarship activities, support services on offer, and meet with academic staff. POLIS University also systematically participates in information fairs, as well as job fairs, in cooperation with different partners such as the Ministry of Education and Tirana Municipality, alongside the routine Open Days.

4.3   Programmes of study are organised by modules and adhere to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Study programmes can be accessed via the University portal and the Albanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (ASCAL) website. The University allows for credit transfers from other institutions and these are assessed by a special commission in accordance with the regulations for each programme of study.

4.4   Students are admitted to bachelor programmes and integrated master programmes through a selection process involving their GPA and a test. The process is nationally centralised and coordinated by the Centre for Academic Services. The admission for second cycle and third cycle programmes is managed independently by higher education institutions in compliance with the national legal framework. Joint or double degrees require compliance with the legislation in both countries. The PhD programme with the University of Ferrara, Italy has an annual call for applications published in the official websites of both institutions.

4.5   The review team tested the effectiveness of the University's approach to student admission, progression, recognition and certification through the analysis of documentation provided by the institution, and through meeting with a range of stakeholders.

4.6   The review team met with a representative group of students, who confirmed that the organisation of courses, their structure and credits was clear. The review team learnt that the University offers students the opportunity to take part in international mobility schemes which are promoted through open calls on its website. Academic achievements of participants are tracked and recorded by the academic department and registrar; transcripts of records detailing credits achieved are provided by host institutions within a set timeframe.

4.7   Didactic Regulations provide a comprehensive reference point for staff and have the potential to ensure consistency of approach across the University. They are available on the University website. They describe the link between assessments, intended learning

outcomes and marking criteria. Students receive terms of reference for modules studied and confirmed that these are explained in detail, as well as the marking criteria and the points required for each grade at the start of teaching. While students are asked in student surveys to confirm that they understand the terms of reference appropriate to their course, the regulations do not oblige all teachers to share terms of reference with students to enable a better understanding of the assignment or project. The University explains that some courses do not incorporate assignments and that therefore terms of reference can vary alongside the need to communicate terms of reference. To ensure this process is applied consistently across all courses and modules, the review team suggests the University should amend article 27 of the Didactic Regulations to ensure all variations of terms of reference are consistently made available to students by staff to enable all students to get a better understanding of their assignment, project or programme.

4.8   The Didactic Regulations set out the details of progression stipulating the number of credits students must achieve in order to progress to the next year of study and details for the requirement of achievement for the diploma and diploma supplement. Diplomas are achieved via successful diploma thesis defence which is a public process in front of a Diploma Committee. Diplomas are issued to students who have met all the requirements of study. Graduation certificates are issued in a public graduation ceremony.

4.9   While the Didactic Regulations is a useful document, the review team noted that some of the references in the regulations should be checked for accuracy, for instance Article 19.2 appears to refer incorrectly to Article 59.

4.10   Student progression is recorded and maintained electronically by the Registrar's office, which manages all student data from admissions to graduation. Data is held for matriculation, grades, attendance and graduation, capturing the student life-cycle and data reporting to the Ministry of Education for statistical purposes.

4.11   To support the institution's data management, it has in place a detailed institutional data management plan (DMP) that encompasses institutional policies and standards, sets out data management roles and responsibilities, defines types of data collected, and sets out data-sharing principles. At present the implementation of the DMP is not supported financially by the institution. In order to fully develop and implement the DMP the review team **recommends** that the University ensure appropriate resources are assigned to support the ongoing operation of the Digital Management Plan and establish appropriate staff training.

4.12   In analysing the documentary evidence provided by the University and reflecting upon the discussions between the review team and staff, students and employers, the team concludes that the policies and processes relating to student admission, progression, recognition and certification align with the requirements outlined in Standard 1.4 and that the University applies pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life cycle'. The review team considers, that while there is a recommendation under this Standard, it does not represent any serious risk to the management of this Standard. Therefore, the review team concludes that Standard 1.4 is **met**.

Standard 1.5   Teaching staff

Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

Findings

5.1   POLIS University currently employs 108 full academic staff and 40 support staff, with a diverse representation of foreign citizens and individuals with PhD degrees. There are 55 members of the staff with at least a PhD degree (out of whom 13 are professors) and 15 are PhD candidates.

5.2   Recruitment at POLIS is conducted through a competitive process and is regulated by the Human Resource Management Strategy, which is based on the institution's statute. Vacancies are announced publicly, and after a pre-selection process based on eligibility criteria, short-listed candidates have a panel interview. There are a variety of robust criteria from the Albanian government which regulate the qualifications that teaching staff are required to hold.

5.3   POLIS University has an induction strategy for new staff, which includes providing access to internal documents, a staff guide, and tailored training. The performance of academic staff is assessed periodically, and staff have an individual work plan that includes didactic, administrative, and research engagement, which is evaluated using dedicated evaluation indicators and forms adopted by the IQAU. Departments provide personalised feedback and assistance to staff members based on their performance.

5.4   All academic staff commit to an individual work plan which includes didactic, administrative and research engagement to be carried out during the academic year. This annex is an integral part of their contract. Staff performance in each activity is subject to periodic assessment. There are dedicated evaluation indicators for teaching activity as well as for research activity. Departments provide personalised feedback and support (if necessary) to staff following assessment.

5.5   The review team evaluated the effectiveness of POLIS University arrangements relating to this standard through discussions with faculty, staff and students during a virtual site visit, and by scrutinising a wide range of institutional policy and procedure documents, reports and records of meetings.

5.6   Staff met by the review team were happy with the support provided on joining the institution. The University encourages staff to participate in exchange and mobility projects with partner institutions abroad. The institution's International Unit and Projects Office coordinates mobility opportunities and works with department heads to discuss participation opportunities for staff. Staff are able to take sabbaticals The research agenda is the guiding document for research at POLIS. The institution's research activity is carried out within each department and through research units of each faculty. A research agenda, produced after a brainstorming session with all academic staff, guides research activity. The institution also organises international conferences on specific research fields and encourages academic staff to participate in international conferences by allocating a budget for each department at the beginning of each academic year. The review team considers that this participatory approach that aligns research objectives and institutional objectives is **good practice**.

5.7   POLIS University prioritises the publication of the outcomes of scientific research, and publishes the Forum A+P Journal, an instrument for staff to disseminate their research. The

journal has been recognised by MES as a scientific journal and is working towards international indexation.

5.8   Staff development falls under the auspices of the institutional development policy. Institutional development centres on three key areas such as teaching, research and service to the community. Some staff have taken part in exchange and mobility projects. There are plans for meeting the research objectives, although it is unclear how this links to teaching, or the different roles involved in teaching (for instance, academic advisers, teaching staff). There is a peer-observation process, which staff spoke highly of, and staff are assessed by student evaluations. There are a range of opportunities for promotion, which are published, and which staff can apply for as outlined above.

5.9   The staff development plan sets out a variety of different training sessions, although it may be helpful to link these to institutional objectives and define how the institution will judge for these to have been met or not met and timescales. Furthermore, some of the staff met by the review team would benefit from being able to better articulate how they would differentiate their teaching for students at different European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels, to ensure that they are pitching their teaching correctly. The review team **recommends** that the University amend opportunities for continuous professional development for all teaching staff to emphasise distinctions between EQF levels.

5.10   Overall, the review team concludes that POLIS University is able to assure itself of the competence of its teachers. The University applies fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of staff. Its participatory approach that aligns research objectives and institutional objectives is **good practice**. While there is a recommendation under this Standard, it does not represent any serious risk to the management of this Standard. The review team concludes, therefore, that the Standard is **met**.

Standard 1.6   Learning resources and student support

Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

Findings

6.1   Opened in 2006, the University is housed in modern, spacious, light and airy facilities conducive to student learning. Facilities are in one main building with classrooms, lecture theatres, workshops, laboratories, administrative offices and student facilities easily accessible. Building safety regulations are supported by evacuation plans, a fire protection act, laboratory accreditations and laboratory equipment safety checks.

6.2   The review team tested the effectiveness of the University's approach to learning resources and student support through the analysis of documentation provided by the institution, by means of a virtual tour of the building and through meeting with a range of stakeholders.

6.3   The library, based on the library in the Co-Plan Institute, a parent organisation, provides students with printed resources (books, journals, reports, magazines) as well as online resources via two databases, EBSCO and JSTOR. Resources in foreign languages such as English and Italian are also available to students and staff. The library provides open access computers, reading and study spaces. The library rules are set out in the Library Guide including a mission statement, and student feedback to the review team indicated that students were satisfied with the physical and online resources provided, as well as the workshop facilities that enable them to undertake project work. The review team noted the arrangements and adjustments that the University has in place to support students with physical and learning disabilities. Based on the evidence provided in documentation and the virtual tour of the facilities, the review team identifies the extensive range of learning resources that support learning, in particular the special IT facilities to enhance the learning opportunities for students with disabilities as **good practice**.

6.4   Students with disabilities have been considered during the design of the building and ramps, lifts and dedicated disabled toilets are provided. In addition, special computing facilities are available for sight-impaired students. In 2022, the University received the Tirana Accessibility Award, which is awarded to public and private organisations that promote the rights of people with disabilities.

6.5   The University was a participant in a Key Action 2 project with 16 partners looking to improve inclusive tertiary education in the West Balkans, resulting in the building of student support capacities. The IDEA-Summary informed the review team of the project objectives including the creation of institutional support structures and protocols to enable access to higher education, enhancing staff capacities to deal with inclusive practices and raise awareness. Based on the documentary evidence provided, the review team found that it is not clear from the documentation (SED) nor the website how participation has improved inclusiveness at the institution and what, if any, changes have been implemented. While the review team supports the ongoing work to formalise procedures and protocols, the review team **recommends** that the University should complete the work that sets out measures to promote inclusiveness that are a result of participation in the IDEA project, particularly in the context of learning and teaching practices, access to student support and how course leadership responds to students' needs in the Student Guide and website.

6.6   The Policy on Students with Disabilities provides definitions of how disabilities and inclusion is defined as well as the commitment by the University to recognise disabilities.

From discussions with academic and support staff, it was not clear to the review team how, and by which timeframe, information on disabled students was being disseminated to academic staff so as to enable them to adjust their teaching practice and learning resources to ensure fair access and participation of these students. While the review team supports the ongoing work in this area the team **recommends** that the University establish a recognised process for the Student Registry Office to formally communicate with academic staff details of students with disabilities.

6.7   To support teaching activities, the University features a CAD laboratory that enables students to apply CAD technologies in their work, 2D drawing and 3D modelling of images. The Autodesk suite available to Architecture and Art & Design students comprises of AutoCAD, 3ds, MAX, and Revit Architecture, and Rhinoceros software. Students have access to MAC computer labs for digital design projects, and two computer labs are available for Computer Science students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Environmental Science students use the Environmental Laboratory and there is a Modelling Laboratory available to all students. A new FabLab (Fabrication Laboratory) will enable students to experiment with digital fabrication, modelling and prototyping. Employers met by the review team appreciated the approach taken by the University to scientific research and innovation and commented that they are able to use the laboratories at the University and draw on POLIS students, researchers and infrastructure, for instance in monitoring air quality in Tirana. Based on the evidence provided and the virtual tour of the facilities, the review team identifies the comprehensive range of specialist facilities on offer which enhance the professional learning opportunities for students as **good practice**.

6.8   The University has a clear international outbound focus and Erasmus exchanges for staff and students form a strong part of the international strategy and is promoted extensively. A number of agreements for cultural, educational and scholarly activities are in place with universities in Portugal, Italy, France and the Netherlands. Students that took the opportunity to study overseas informed the review team that they found the experience valuable and challenging. The Student Registry staff spoke of the support offered to incoming international students and that this was work in progress.

6.9   In addition, the University supports students through fee reductions which are offered to three categories of students by application: excellent and talented students; students from the same family; and students from different social strata including orphans, the Roma community, the economically disadvantaged, disabled or of police officers killed in the line of duty.

6.10   During their studies, students receive support through academic tutors assigned by study year who are responsible for administrative issues, transfers, mobility programmes, graduations, careers guidance, and advice on curriculum changes. The Students Support Strategy and Services sets out the University's commitment to supporting students with financial aid, student engagement, support for students with special needs, personal and professional issues, and the role of academic advisers although this could be made clearer in student guidance.

6.11   In analysing the documentary evidence and virtual tour provided by the University, and reflecting upon the discussions between the review team and staff, students and employers, the team acknowledges that the University has made large investments in modern physical resources and staffing resources to support student services, which align with the requirements outlined in Standard 1.6. The review team identified two areas of good practice around the provision of resources which enhance the learning opportunities for students with disabilities, and the comprehensive range of specialist facilities on offer which enhance the professional learning opportunities for students. The team concludes that the University has appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensures that adequate and

readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided. While there are two recommendations under this Standard, they do not individually or collectively represent any serious risk to the management of this Standard. The review team concludes, therefore, that the Standard is **met**.

Standard 1.7   Information management

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

Findings

7.1   POLIS uses an Information Management Platform for student records and ongoing data collection. Senior management, staff and students reported that they found this platform helpful and it provided them with important information, including student attendance records, student assessment results and so on.

7.2   The review team tested the effectiveness of the University's approach to Information management through the analysis of documentation provided by the institution, a demonstration of the University information management platform and through meeting with a range of stakeholders.

7.3   The demonstration of the functionality of the platform confirmed that it is a storage database with little capacity for analytical evaluations. As such, any analysis is done manually, by exporting into Excel and creating trends. The platform was found to be most useful to support MES reporting requirements, which the Secretariat responded to, for example reports on students with disabilities, completion rates and so on. While acknowledging that the system is capable of holding useful data, it was unclear to the team how the data was kept accurate and/or curated given the manual intervention and if there was any ongoing monitoring to check the accuracy of the data before such reports were produced. The team **recommends** that the University develop clear stipulations for ongoing monitoring of data to guarantee its reliability and indicate what data is worth collecting according to its usefulness.

7.4   The review team inquired into the system's possibility to alert various stakeholders if students were on a downward trajectory with their academic results or if they were close to exceeding the allowed limit on absences. It was confirmed that the platform issues an automatic alert when a student has not accumulated 30 ECTS in any given year. The team understands this is information which the MES requires, and the University uses it to decide on cases which may require expulsion. Similarly, the platform will issue an alert when a student's attendance falls below the 75% attendance threshold; however, the system does not issue any alerts before thresholds are met. The team suggests that an alert external to the software (for example an email alert) might be made available for students to provide early warning of an impending breach of regulations.

7.5   Data management responsibilities and public information sign-off are stipulated in the Data Management Plan which notes that 'The roles and responsibilities for data management typically include data owners, data custodians, data stewards, and data users. Data owners are accountable for the data and responsible for ensuring the accuracy, integrity, and completeness of the data'. The team was presented with a data workflow which showed these roles in interaction and during the Information Management platform demonstration it was clear that access was restricted depending on the role which the user had been allocated. When asked where final sign-off would be granted, the University indicated that, in accordance with the data management workflow, there is a combination of responsibilities between the responsible units and the legal affairs office.

7.6   The review team asked for examples of how data is used strategically and what data is proving to be most relevant in supporting decision-making. The University highlighted the data necessary for MES reporting and monitoring but did not articulate any clear internal

examples of usage, beyond the 30 ECTS expelling threshold. The team further probed if any changes to programmes had been generated by the evaluation of statistical data gathered. The University did not provide any such examples, referring to the source of changes to teaching or assessment methodologies to be found in projects where staff were involved. However, the review team was able to identify a number of examples of how data is collected by the University to inform decision making, for instance through the uploading of course and student information by academic staff, the uploading of statistical reports about courses, students and staff by Deans and Rectorate, and the use of data in the development of the University annual institutional report.

7.7   Copyright and intellectual property of staff stipulations are included in the Code of Research Conduct and Ethics. The Data Management Plan also includes reference to ethical considerations and intellectual property rights.

7.8   Data archiving arrangements are made by the University. All documentation is held both physically and electronically with off-site back-up servers in operation. Student files are kept in the Secretariat. Theses and projects/assignments are archived in the departments. Both are centralised archives and are kept for as long as the regulation provides and then they are securely disposed of. Data protection is applied in compliance with Albanian law. The team thus noted that the University system is appropriately secured for data protection and properly backed up to safeguard against loss of personal and institutional data and to ensure continuity of the educational and administrative processes.

7.9   The review team concludes that POLIS University collects, analyses and uses relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities. While there is one recommendation under this Standard, it does not represent any serious risk to the management of this Standard. The review team concludes, therefore, that the Standard is **met**.

Standard 1.8   Public information

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

Findings

8.1   The University's website is one of the methods used to disseminate public information. The website publishes its background, its history to date and role in the region, organisational structure, an academic overview of its faculties and staff, programme information and its international exposure.

8.2   The review team tested the effectiveness of the University's approach to public information through the analysis of documentation provided by the institution and through meeting with a range of stakeholders.

8.3   Although the SED states that an annual report which includes financial, statistical, quality assurance and other information related directly to the operations of the institution is published online each year, it was not available on the website (accessed 04 March 2023). Other information pertinent to governance and the public interest, such as a redacted version of the Development Strategy and ISO Certificate are available on the website.

8.4   The website contains a section on study programmes, including undergraduate, master's and professional programmes. The website details student support information. All overview pages detail the programmes available, fee details, language of study and a link to apply. The level of English proficiency expected at entry is specified within the scholarship details on the website. Each programme page provides details of employment opportunities and modules to be studied in each semester.

8.5   While the review team was able to find most relevant information on the website, navigation between different areas could be improved - for instance, between programme pages and pages detailing student services. In addition, some existing links malfunctioned and some information needs updating. The review team recognises that the website is being updated and supports its work to improve navigation, further clarify admissions and study details, and public information documentation.

8.6   While the student guide is useful, it contains no detailed information about the student journey, such as academic year dates, support services, study guidance, exam-related policies and procedures, disability support, conduct and discipline procedures, how to become a student council member**,** or how to become involved in the governance of programmes. While the review team acknowledges that information exists in a variety of documents, the team **recommends** that the University should amend the student guide to include detailed information that governs the student journey to comprehensively inform students about their academic responsibilities and opportunities.

8.7   The University has a wide range of local partnerships, international collaborations and international projects; however, on the website (University Profile page) no further information can be found as the Links and Partnerships weblink was not working due to routine maintenance at the time of the review.

8.8   The review team noted the breadth of scientific research projects. The website has a dedicated section for scientific research and innovation that includes the institution's research agenda for each of the faculties and completed projects.

8.9   The University's web strategy 2022-2024 sets out the goal that its website will effectively showcase University staff, students and the work that is being undertaken. The strategy is divided into phases and assigns areas of responsibility, and work streams include audience and gap identification, content models, gaps and types and content optimisation.

8.10 Overall, the review team concludes that the University publishes information about its activities, including programmes, which is mostly clear, accurate, objective, and partially up-to-date and readily accessible. While there is a recommendation under this Standard, it does not represent any serious risk to the management of this Standard. The review team concludes, therefore, that the Standard is **met**.

Standard 1.9   Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

Findings

9.1   POLIS uses a system of annual institutional review for quality assurance, which is managed by the IQAU and detailed via the Rules and Regulations of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit. IQAU has oversight of the institution's academic, teaching, support and research quality with the aim to improve and increase quality. It produces an annual report on institutional performance which details student participation rates, monitoring of and participation in student evaluations, quality of teaching staff, and departmental evaluations. The unit draws information from various sources to prepare the report which is subsequently presented to the Academic Senate and the offices of the Rector and the Deans of Faculties. Evaluations of teaching quality and research output, evaluations by students, and evaluations of administrative functions all feed into this report.

9.2   The review team tested the effectiveness of the University's approach to the ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes through the analysis of documentation provided by the institution and through meeting with a range of stakeholders.

9.3   The University reports on a regular basis to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES) and the Albanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (ASCAL) who verify that the University continues to meet its national quality assurance obligations. As part of these obligations, IQAU also manages the process of assessment of study programmes, which according to Albanian law are subject to a cyclical review every six years. This process requires self-evaluation reports to be submitted and results in the issuance of valuable recommendations for the University to consider. The outcomes from the student surveys, as well as other elements like student workload, teaching methodologies, or curricula content form part of the analysis related to study programmes. The review team note that while it has a clear internal quality culture the University has some reliance on external assessment processes to help generate development actions. The review team believes that more needs to be done to ensure integration between internal and external processes so that all these processes can be seen to serve strategic goals directly.

9.4   The Quality Assurance Policy/Strategy 2023-2027 refers to 'quality review' which it identifies as being 'the main procedure and mechanism for the quality assessment both at institutional level or for the study programmes' and stipulates that assessment is organised by implementation of the Plan-do-check-act approach.

9.5   The University uses the ASCAL cycle for review, but also stipulates that programme content can be reviewed as and when considered necessary. The review team understands that the University is allowed to make changes up to a 20% margin before notifications need to be submitted to MES and staff confirmed that they make minor changes (for example to teaching methodologies, content elements, bibliography lists) on an ongoing basis. Although POLIS appeared positive about its agility in allowing programme changes, the review team considers there is a risk which needs to be mitigated, as too much change, too often, even if within the 20% limit, can impact negatively on the delivery of the programme from both staff and student perspectives. The review team asked how smaller changes are controlled and

where the oversight lies for minor changes incrementally creating major changes over time, but received no answer of how this may be monitored. When multiple minor changes are brought to the programme, there is the possibility of there being some collective impact on the programme learning outcomes, which may require overarching revisions and allows the opportunity for course correction, should this be necessary. The review team applauds the effort that the University makes to ensure that learning materials are kept up to date, however, the team would suggest that the University monitors the number of minor incremental changes to avoid cumulative impact on programme learning outcomes.

9.6   While the Ministry of Education and Sports is responsible for the approval of new programmes and significant changes to existing programmes, the IQAU Regulations Article 5 gives IQAU the responsibility for 'content analysis of study programmes, after receiving feedback from students, professors, employed students and the labour market', while the SED confirms that the departments have the main role for 'the design, review and improvement of programmes on a cyclical basis'. The review team scrutinised syllabi of courses across a range of programmes and found that the approach to learning outcomes is variable in their alignment with Bologna recommendations and EQF level descriptors. For instance, syllabi of courses do not refer to the EQF level of the programme, and vary in detail and format. Consequently, it becomes difficult for programme learning outcomes to consistently ensure student achievement is set at the correct level. Bearing in mind the published IQAU responsibility outlined above, the review team is clear that it is the responsibility of IQAU to ensure that the syllabi receive relevant recommendations for improvement to ensure learning outcomes can serve their purpose. The review team sets the **condition** that the University strengthens internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi are set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated so as to support teaching, learning and assessment activities and that they align with EQF.

9.7   As noted in Standard 1, the review team found the involvement of stakeholders to be variable and frequently prompted by informal interactions. This was seen to result in insufficiently robust procedures for closing the feedback loop and retaining formal collaborations. The same is found to be valid for periodic programme review activities, where the involvement of external stakeholders requires more formality and actions recommended for programme improvements need to be more consistently communicated to close the feedback loop. Whereas change-related communication was indicated to take the form of mass emails or group meetings, there was no evidence to reflect how much engagement there would be with such approaches.

9.8   For ongoing monitoring of programmes, the review team found that processes were largely conducted ad hoc with students, staff and employers providing feedback as and when they believed it could be relevant. POLIS presented no system to capture such feedback formally, and to give it attention systemically and in a timely manner. The approach described was reactive, where such feedback could be considered, and action taken if it reached any of the formal periodic processes. Students indicated they would turn to their teachers to rectify issues, as necessary. Whereas this may work at an individual course level, there seemed to be little formal mechanism by which changes might be proposed which might affect consistently more courses, processes or structures. The review team **recommends** that the University should further develop and formalise processes for ongoing monitoring activities to ensure feedback can be actioned in a timely, relevant and systematic manner.

9.9   The review team recognises that the University has also taken on voluntary accreditation activities for ESG and ISO 9001 compliance and collaborates on multiple European projects and with institutional partners (for example the University of Ferrara PhD arrangement). The review team notes that these engagements provide ample opportunity for

quality introspection but highlights that such engagements will require more robustness in the ongoing monitoring and periodic review approaches, as designed within the internal quality assurance system, to be consistently successful.

9.10 The review team concludes that the University has some arrangements in place to monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and they largely respond to the needs of students and society; however, their capacity to lead to the continuous improvement of programmes is undermined by insufficient arrangements for formally gathering recommendations for improvement and inconsistent mechanisms for formal feedback and action. The review team concludes that this Standard is **met subject to meeting a specific condition**: the review team sets the **condition** that the University strengthens internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi are set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated so as to support teaching, learning and assessment activities and that they align with EQF within **12 months**.

9.11 POLIS University submitted further evidence in November 2023. The review team acknowledges the significant amount of work undertaken by the University in order to meet this Standard more fully. In particular, it is clear that the University has worked to strengthen its internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi are set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated.

9.12 This has been achieved by the establishing of a commission in each of the University's faculties to conduct a review of the regulation of study programmes, paying particular attention to the revision of intended learning outcomes and their alignment with the EQF. This initial stage was followed by training sessions for academic staff to revise the syllabi in order to align them with the revised intended learning outcomes.

9.13 The new syllabi are subject to a consistency check by Heads of Department, who focus on objectives, content, methodology and assessment criteria before they are uploaded to the University virtual learning environment for presentation to students.

9.14 The review team considers that the condition has been addressed and Standard 1.9 is **met** at a threshold level. The review team **recommends** that further work should be done to embed internal procedures to ensure that programmes and syllabi continue to be set at the correct level and learning outcomes are consistently formulated so as to support teaching, learning and assessment activities and that they align with EQF.

Standard 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

Findings

10.1   Periodic reviews are a legal requirement in Albania, and external review is undertaken by the Albania Agency on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (QAAHE) and the accreditation board.

10.2   POLIS University has undergone 19 external evaluation/accreditation procedures, comprising three institutional and 16 study programme evaluations, including a previous review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

10.3   There is a quality assurance strategy, which sets out both internal evaluation conducted by the University, and external evaluation/accreditation carried out by the Albanian Agency on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (QAAHE) and Accreditation Board (AB).

10.4   In addition, the University is reviewed through the the annual accreditation of the joint PhD programme with the University of Ferrara by ANVUR.

10.5   The periodic review process consists of three main phases: application phase, drafting the self-evaluation report (SER) and supporting documents, and the final review and decision-making stage. The University is required to draft an action plan for the periodic review, which includes actions from previous reviews, evaluation of student feedback and performance, internal annual monitoring, feedback from alumni and market research, identification of strengths and areas for enhancement, and the use of self-evaluation report templates approved by QAAHE.

10.6   The preparation of the self-evaluation report (SER) involves the establishment of a Study Evaluation Group (SEG) for each study programme, submission of relevant information and data by each unit, drafting the chapters of the SER by the SEG, conducting information meetings with students, internal discussions on the SER, and distribution of the SER for comments and feedback from academic and administrative staff members and students. The final version of the SER is submitted to QAAHE for their review. Documentation undergoes a preliminary review by the ministry, and if any deficiencies or inaccuracies are found, there are a number of opportunities for the institution to address. Having received a positive evaluation, the minister approves the opening of the study programme through an official order. This process ensures an additional layer of quality assurance in the approval of programmes by the Ministry of Education and Sports.

10.7   POLIS publishes information about its institutional accreditation, study programmes, and academic quality on its official website, which provides transparency and information to both current and prospective students. It is clear that the institution takes on proactive external evaluation.

10.8   The previous QAA report did not identify any weaknesses, nor make any recommendations. Furthermore, the review conducted by the Albanian Quality Assurance Agency, QAAHE was extremely positive, with all five criteria 'fully fulfilled'. Consequently, the review team saw no evidence of a mechanism for action planning resulting from external quality assurance to take forward any recommendations.

10.9   The review team concludes that the University undergoes external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis and that consequently the standard is **met**.

Glossary

Action plan
A plan developed by the institution after the QAA review report has been published, which is signed off by the head of the institution. It responds to the recommendations in the report and gives any plans to capitalise on the identified good practice.

Annual monitoring
Checking a process or activity every year to see whether it meets expectations for standards and quality. Annual reports normally include information about student achievements and may comment on the evaluation of courses and modules.

Collaborative arrangement
A formal arrangement between a degree-awarding body and another higher education provider. These may be degree-awarding bodies with which the institution collaborates to deliver higher education qualifications on behalf of the degree-awarding bodies. Alternatively, they may be other delivery organisations who deliver part or all of a proportion of the institution's higher education programmes.

Condition
Conditions set out action that is required. Conditions are only used with unsatisfactory judgements where the quality cannot be approved. Conditions may be used where quality or standards are at risk/continuing risk if action is not taken or if a required standard is not met and action is needed for it to be met.

Degree-awarding body
Institutions that have authority, for example from a national agency, to issue their own awards. Institutions applying to IQR may be degree-awarding bodies themselves or may collaborate to deliver higher education qualifications on behalf of degree-awarding bodies.

Desk-based analysis
An analysis by the review team of evidence, submitted by the institution, that enables the review team to identify its initial findings and subsequently supports the review team as it develops its review findings.

Enhancement
See **quality enhancement**.

European Standards and Guidelines
For details, including the full text on each standard, see www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg.

Examples of practice
A list of policies and practices that a review team may use when considering the extent to which an institution meets the standards for review. The examples should be considered as a guide only, in acknowledgment that not all of them will be appropriate for all institutions.

Externality
The use of experts from outside a higher education provider, such as external examiners or external advisers, to assist in quality assurance procedures.

Facilitator
The member of staff identified by the institution to act as the principal point of contact for the QAA officer and who will be available during the review visit, to assist with any questions or requests for additional documentation.

Good practice
A feature of good practice is a process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to the institution's higher education provision.

Lead student representative
An optional voluntary role that is designed to allow students at the institution applying for IQR to play a central part in the organisation of the review.

Oversight
Objective scrutiny, monitoring and quality assurance of educational provision.

Peer reviewers
Members of the review team who make the decisions in relation to the review of the institution. Peer reviewers have experience of managing quality and academic standards in higher education or have recent experience of being a student in higher education.

Periodic review
An internal review of one or more programmes of study, undertaken by institutions periodically (typically once every five years), using nationally agreed reference points, to confirm that the programmes are of an appropriate academic standard and quality. The process typically involves experts from other higher education providers. It covers areas such as the continuing relevance of the programme, the currency of the curriculum and reference materials, the employability of graduates and the overall performance of students. Periodic review is one of the main processes whereby institutions can continue to assure themselves about the academic quality and standards of their awards.

Programme of study
An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification. UK higher education programmes must be approved and validated by UK degree-awarding bodies.

Quality enhancement
The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported.

QAA officer
The person appointed by QAA to manage the review programme and to act as the liaison between the review team and the institution.

Quality assurance
The systematic monitoring and evaluation of learning and teaching, and the processes that support them, to make sure that the standards of academic awards meet the necessary standards, and that the quality of the student learning experience is being safeguarded and improved.

Recognition of prior learning
Assessing previous learning that has occurred in any of a range of contexts including school, college and university, and/or through life and work experiences.

Recommendation
Review teams make recommendations where they agree that an institution should consider developing or changing a process or a procedure in order to improve the institution's higher education provision.

Reference points
Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

Self-evaluation document
A self-evaluation report by an institution. The submission should include information about the institution as well as an assessment of the effectiveness of its quality systems.

Student submission
A document representing student views that describes what it is like to be a student at the institution, and how students' views are considered in the institution's decision-making and quality assurance processes.

Validation
The process by which an institution ensures that its academic programmes meet expected academic standards and that students will be provided with appropriate learning opportunities. It may also be applied to circumstances where a degree-awarding institution gives approval for its awards to be offered by a partner institution or organisation.