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Paper

Title: Joint Efforts for Quality Enhancement: HAKA-NAQA Partnership to Support Ukrainian Universities through Institutional Accreditation

Abstract

This paper explores a practical case of international cooperation in quality assurance (QA), highlighting the collaboration between the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) and the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance of Ukraine (NAQA). Initiated within the framework of a Memorandum of Cooperation signed in November 2023, this partnership addresses a pressing need: to develop and pilot an institutional accreditation model tailored to Ukraine's unique higher education context, especially under the strain of ongoing Russian - Ukrainian war.

With over 500 higher education institutions and about 25,000 study programs, Ukraine's QA system is heavily resource intensive. Moving from program-based to institutional accreditation offers a more sustainable and scalable solution. In response to NAQA's request in early 2024, HAKA supported the design of a new institutional accreditation framework, including the development of methodology, training for staff and experts, and a comprehensive pilot phase.

The initiative, funded by ESTDEV – the Estonian Centre for International Development Cooperation – includes pilot accreditations at three Ukrainian universities: Kyiv National Economic University, Lutsk National Technical University, and the National University of Ostroh Academy. These pilots have involved co-led training, collaborative expert panel formation (with three experts each from Estonia and Ukraine), and hybrid-format site visits in May–June 2025. Evaluation decisions are expected by August 2025, with results to be shared during feedback seminars and at the Ukrainian Quality Assurance Forum UQAF-2025 in September 2025.

This joint presentation—featuring both QA agencies and a participating university—will offer multi-perspective insights on how international QA cooperation can drive policy innovation, reinforce institutional resilience, and foster trust across borders. It exemplifies how shared goals, transparency, and mutual learning can sustain and strengthen international academic partnerships even in times of crisis.

Potential discussion questions:

How can international cooperation between QA agencies ensure both the contextual relevance and credibility of new QA instruments, such as institutional accreditation, particularly in countries undergoing rapid change or crisis?

What are the practical implications and added value of institutional accreditation for universities in a challenging environment like Ukraine, and how can international partnerships support institutional capacity and motivation for quality enhancement?

Introduction: Institutional Accreditation in a Time of Crisis

For Ukraine, the development of institutional accreditation is both a long-term reform goal and an urgent necessity. With more than 500 higher education institutions and around 25,000 study programs, the current system of program-based accreditation is resource-intensive and increasingly unsustainable. The transition to institutional accreditation has been identified as a strategic solution, but its formal

launch has been postponed until the end of martial law due to the extraordinary circumstances of the Russian–Ukrainian war.

In this context, the joint project between the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (HAKA) and the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance of Ukraine (NAQA), initiated within the framework of the 2023 Memorandum of Cooperation, provided a timely and highly valuable opportunity. With the support of ESTDEV - Estonian Centre for International Development Cooperation, this initiative piloted institutional accreditation procedures at three Ukrainian universities in 2025. Although these pilots are not yet legally binding in Ukraine, they are of immense significance: they prepare the system, build capacity, and generate evidence of institutional readiness for future accreditation.

From NAQA's perspective, the project represents an exemplary case of international cooperation in quality assurance. It demonstrates how cross-border peer learning can have system-wide impact, strengthen institutional resilience, and build trust in Ukrainian higher education even in the midst of crisis.

Strategic Value of the HAKA–NAQA Partnership

The decision to invite HAKA's support was motivated by NAQA's strategic need to design an institutional accreditation framework that would be both credible at the European level and feasible in the Ukrainian context. By partnering with an experienced EQAR-registered agency, NAQA sought not only technical expertise but also the assurance that its future system would be aligned with the ESG 2015 and comparable across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The collaboration has allowed NAQA to pilot institutional accreditation procedures with real universities, involving mixed HAKA–NAQA expert panels and hybrid site visits. For NAQA, this is not simply an experiment at the institutional level but a system-level rehearsal: an opportunity to see how standards, procedures, and stakeholder engagement would work in practice, and how they would need to be adapted to Ukrainian conditions.

Key features of HAKA-NAQA joint project

Quality assessment in Estonian higher education began in 1997 with the accreditation of study programmes, which continued for two full cycles until 2009. A new system was then introduced, making institutional accreditation the main quality assurance tool. Between 2012–2018, programme group assessments ran alongside institutional accreditation. In 2019, a new cycle and regulation for institutional accreditation were launched, making it the sole regular assessment in Estonia. Both accreditation models have successfully passed ENQA evaluations, confirming alignment with ESG standards. Next year marks the start of the third institutional accreditation cycle under the new regulation.

In the initial phase of the project, the task was to develop a model of institutional accreditation suitable for the conditions of Ukraine. Since HAKA already had two ESG-compliant regulations, the working group of HAKA and NAQA jointly decided to take as a basis the model implemented by HAKA in 2012-2018 and refine it with Ukraine-specific requirements. We also added important topics in the light of recent years' developments. The evaluation took place across four areas: Organisational management and performance; Teaching and learning; Research, development and/or other creative activity; Service to society. The areas, in turn, were divided into subareas. The regulation is public on the HAKA website:

IA_procedure_Ukraine-2024-1.pdf

The next stage of the project was the selection of Ukrainian universities participating in pilot accreditations. NAQA announced a competition for this purpose with selection criteria:

- We expected neither the largest nor the smallest universities for the pilot;
- We wanted to get universities from different regions of Ukraine for piloting;

- An important selection criterion was also that the universities had to submit their motivation letter why they want to participate in the accreditation and what they expect from it.

In total, applications were received from fourteen universities, and three universities were selected: Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman, Lutsk National Technical University, and the National University of Ostroh Academy.

In October of last year, HAKA and NAQA jointly conducted self-assessment training for three universities. The training took place in each university over two days and included a number of practical tasks to practice the analysis of the accreditation criteria and the writing of the report. The deadline for submitting the self-assessment reports was agreed to be March 15, 2025. All universities submitted the reports on time. The reports were reviewed by HAKA and NAQA staff. In general, the reports fully met the requirements, however, we asked for clarification on some aspects.

Regarding the expert panels, we agreed on the following principles:

- Each panel has three experts from Ukraine and three from Estonia;
- Since the Ukrainian experts have no experience in institutional accreditation, the chairmen and secretaries of the panels are from Estonia;
- Each panel has one student and one non-university member.

In March-April of this year, we conducted trainings for expert panels: first training for all panels together and then separately for each university panel.

Site visits in hybrid form took place at the end of May - beginning of June this year. The Ukrainian experts were on site at the universities, and the Estonian experts were online. All site visits lasted three days. Despite the state of war, all interviews managed to be conducted according to schedule, although some interviews had to be conducted in bomb shelters due to air alarms.

At the end of July, the expert reports were completed and are published on the HAKA website:

Institutional accreditations outside Estonia - HAKA

The decisions of the HAKA Council on the institutional accreditation of three universities can also be found in the same place. On 29 August 2025, the HAKA Council adopted decisions to accredit all three universities for seven years.

17.-18. In September, the All-Ukrainian Higher Education Quality Forum (UQAF) was held in the Ukrainian city of Lutsk. The forum was very representative with over 800 participants from most Ukrainian universities. Two HAKA employees also participated on site and gave an overview of the project and its results in a panel discussion together with NAQA, experts and representatives of the participating universities. It was clear that Ukrainian universities had a great interest in institutional accreditation and wanted to go through this process themselves. Accreditation certificates were also ceremoniously handed over to three universities as part of the forum.

At the end of November, feedback seminars will be held in three universities with the participation of HAKA, NAQA and experts.

Alignment with ESG 2015 and Relevance of HAKA Standards

One of the clearest outcomes of the project is the confirmation that Ukrainian higher education institutions are capable of meeting the expectations of ESG 2015 at the institutional level. The pilot evaluations demonstrated that Ukrainian universities already possess functioning internal quality assurance systems, governance structures, and strategic planning capacities that correspond to European standards.

Equally important, the project confirmed that the standards applied by HAKA are highly relevant for Ukraine. Only minor adjustments were necessary to reflect national legislation and the exceptional circumstances of martial law. This high degree of compatibility underscores the structural alignment of

Ukraine's QA system with the wider EHEA and reassures both national and international stakeholders that Ukraine is prepared to introduce institutional accreditation without major conceptual gaps.

Enhancing Quality Culture and Reputation

For NAQA, institutional accreditation is not only a regulatory mechanism but also a tool for building quality culture within universities. The pilots were explicitly enhancement-oriented, encouraging institutions to engage in self-reflection, evaluate their strategic priorities, and consider how quality assurance is embedded in their daily operations.

The project has also contributed to the international reputation of Ukrainian higher education. By engaging in a joint evaluation process with a respected European agency, Ukrainian universities have demonstrated their commitment to transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement. At a time when the war poses risks to the visibility and credibility of Ukrainian academia, this collaboration sends a strong signal of resilience and quality to the international community.

The university's motivation to undergo institutional accreditation

Lutsk National Technical University (LNTU) is a public higher education institution in Ukraine offering multidisciplinary training and committed to aligning its standards with European practices. Despite the ongoing war, LNTU demonstrates resilience by sustaining academic continuity, supporting national defence efforts, and addressing the needs of vulnerable students. Through its participation in the HAKA–NAQA accreditation initiative, the university advances its strategic goal of fostering regional development and sustainable growth. Guided by its vision to become an innovation-driven "growth pole" in the Volyn region, LNTU promotes collaboration across education, science, business, and government, upholding values of teamwork, knowledge, quality, efficiency, opportunity, investment, and partnership.

LNTU's motivation to engage in the institutional accreditation process can be understood through several key drivers:

- **Benchmarking and International Alignment.** Accreditation enables LNTU to benchmark its internal QA processes against European standards and ESG 2015. It offers a pathway to international alignment, validation, and enhanced reputation.
- **Capacity Building in Governance and Quality Culture.** The process supports evidence-based improvements in governance and leadership. LNTU sees it as a tool to improve educational relevance and embed a stronger culture of continuous improvement.
- **Fostering Innovation and Academic–Industry Collaboration.** Accreditation helps strengthen teaching quality and innovation. It also fosters partnerships with industry, reinforcing LNTU's role in regional innovation ecosystems.
- **External Feedback and Developmental Review.** Engagement with HAKA offers expert, independent feedback to guide strategic planning. This is particularly important for rebuilding trust and capacity in post-crisis conditions.
- **Strengthening Self-Assessment and QA Practices.** The process boosts internal self-assessment and prepares LNTU for future evaluations. Training from HAKA and NAQA promotes staff development and best QA practices in line with the European Higher Education Area.

LNTU's case illustrates how Ukrainian universities can leverage external quality assurance as a strategic tool for institutional development, especially in times of crisis. Participation in the HAKA–NAQA project reflects a proactive approach to quality enhancement, combining local needs with international standards. The motivation expressed by LNTU aligns with broader patterns observed in other participating institutions, highlighting a shared commitment to resilience, innovation, and alignment with European higher education values.

Stakeholder Involvement and Mutual Learning

A particularly valuable feature of the project was the inclusion of diverse stakeholders—students, teachers, HEIs management teams, employers—from both countries. Their participation enriched the evaluation panels and ensured that the outcomes reflected a broad range of perspectives. For NAQA, this stakeholder engagement strengthens the legitimacy of institutional accreditation and aligns with the principle that quality assurance must serve the needs of the academic community and society at large.

Equally significant was the mutual learning that took place between agencies. NAQA staff had the opportunity to work closely with their Estonian colleagues in designing procedures, preparing universities, training experts, and supporting evaluation panels. This hands-on experience represents an important form of capacity building, ensuring that NAQA's team is well-prepared to manage institutional accreditation nationally in the future.

HAKA always asks for feedback from various parties in the process after conducting the assessment. So this time too: all participants in the site visit interviews, experts and university self-analysis teams were asked to reflect on the entire accreditation process.

Overall, the feedback was very positive. For example, the average rating of those who participated in the interviews was 6.7 on a seven-point scale.

The following aspects were most praised by both the interviewees and the universities' self-analysis teams:

- the institutional accreditation process was organized in a highly professional manner by the Estonian and Ukrainian agencies.
- the atmosphere of the site visit was relaxed and, at the same time, constructive.
- the evaluation criteria were completely clear.
- it is important that the evaluation of the institution also included service to society (interaction with the city, projects aimed at the restoration of Ukraine etc).
- self-analysis and the recommendations of experts are a very good basis for developing a new development plan for the University.
- conducting pilot institutional accreditations is an extremely important step for the development of this procedure at the national level in Ukraine.

System-Level Impact for Ukraine

From a national perspective, the key outcomes of the HAKA–NAQA project can be summarized as follows:

- **Evidence of institutional readiness**: Ukrainian universities are aligned with ESG 2015 and capable of undergoing institutional evaluation.
- **Validation of standards**: HAKA's accreditation standards are relevant to Ukraine, requiring only minor contextual adaptation.
- **Strengthened quality culture**: Participating universities gained experience in enhancement-oriented evaluation and developed stronger internal QA practices.
- **Capacity building**: NAQA staff and experts acquired practical experience in institutional accreditation, improving readiness for system-wide implementation.
- **Reputation and trust**: Ukrainian higher education enhanced its visibility and credibility through collaboration with the EQAR-registered agency.
- **Stakeholder legitimacy**: Active involvement of students, teachers, and employers increased trust and ownership in the accreditation process.

Together, these outcomes demonstrate that the Ukrainian higher education system is not only resilient but also future-oriented, even under the strain of war.

University-Level Impact

LNTU began its institutional self-assessment process in early 2024, following its selection as one of three Ukrainian universities to participate in the Institutional Accreditation Project. The assessment covered four key areas and their respective sub-areas, in line with ESG:

- Organisational management and performance;
- Teaching and learning;
- Research, development, and/or other creative activity (RDC);
- Service to society.

Each sub-area evaluation included a synthesis of strengths, identified areas for development, and proposed future actions. To ensure objectivity and inclusivity, the self-assessment process actively involved a wide range of university stakeholders, including academic leaders, faculty, administrative staff, alumni, students, and external partners.

The institutional accreditation process had a significant and multifaceted impact on LNTU, which can be summarised as follows:

- **Strategic Perspective and Institutional Reflection.** The process encouraged a critical and comprehensive reflection on the university's operations through the lens of European institutional accreditation standards. It enabled the university to identify priority areas for development and laid the groundwork for formulating its new strategic development plan for 2026–2030.
- **Capacity Building in Quality Assurance and Governance.** The self-assessment process required a systematic audit of internal processes, documentation, and quality procedures. This has contributed to improved institutional governance, enhanced internal monitoring systems, and greater transparency and accountability across all levels of the university.
- **Alignment with European QA Standards.** The project enabled a detailed comparative analysis of LNTU's internal quality assurance system against the ESG 2015 guidelines, providing a clear roadmap for future alignment with European higher education standards and practices.
- **Teamwork, Engagement, and Institutional Culture.** The process enhanced collective understanding of individual and departmental roles in achieving the university's mission and goals, ultimately improving the implementation of the institution's vision.
- **Independent Evaluation and External Feedback.** External experts provided objective feedback and practical recommendations, supporting future reforms and alignment with best practices in the sector.
- **Enhanced Reputation and Stakeholder Trust.** A successful outcome increased external trust and internal motivation. It affirmed LNTU's commitment to quality and became a source of pride for the university community.

LNTU's experience demonstrates how institutional accreditation, when approached as a developmental process, can foster meaningful change at multiple levels of university life—from governance and quality assurance to staff engagement and public trust. As part of the broader HAKA–NAQA partnership, LNTU's case highlights the potential of external evaluation mechanisms to support systemic improvements and promote the European quality culture within Ukrainian higher education.

Challenges Ahead

While the project itself was implemented smoothly and without major difficulties, NAQA recognizes that the real challenges lie in the future. Scaling institutional accreditation across a large and diverse system of more than 500 institutions will require significant resources, training, and coordination. Sustaining stakeholder engagement and expert capacity will be essential, as will embedding institutional accreditation into the national legislative framework once martial law is lifted.

Another challenge will be to maintain the enhancement-oriented focus of institutional accreditation while also ensuring accountability and comparability. Striking this balance will be crucial for the credibility and effectiveness of the system.

From HAKA perspective the following challenges and areas for improvement have been noted:

- Of course, the most important obstacle in carrying out the accreditation was the fact that there is a state of war in Ukraine. Although the pilot accreditations were completed within the deadlines, there were still a number of problems behind this. If, for example, an expert cannot sleep in her bed for 10 nights in a row due to air raids (she had to spend the night in a bomb shelter), then it is clear that the work is very difficult to do.
- Due to the martial law, site visits took place in a hybrid form, which according to all parties is not the best way. This was also accompanied by some technical problems (internet connection quality).
- Since the institutional accreditation was the first time for both the universities and the Ukrainian experts, it required acquiring new topics and approaches and shifting the focus from quantitative to qualitative aspects and from descriptions to analysis.
- The whole process took place in English, including interviews during the on-site visit. Most of the interviews were conducted with translation, and the quality of the translation was not always the best.
- Sometimes it was a problem for Estonian experts to understand the Ukrainian context (e.g. the principles of science financing), but with the help of Ukrainian colleagues, they were solved.

From the perspective of Lutsk National Technical University, several key challenges emerged during the institutional accreditation process, offering important lessons for similar future initiatives:

- **Data Management and Reporting Capacity.** The preparation of the self-evaluation report required the collection, verification, and systematisation of a large volume of quantitative and qualitative data, including statistical indicators and documentary evidence. This placed a significant time and workload burden on the working groups involved in the process.
- **Language and Communication Barriers.** As the entire accreditation procedure—including documentation, interviews, and site visits—was conducted in English, language-related challenges were particularly pronounced. Core institutional documents such as the university charter, internal regulations, and quality assurance procedures had to be translated. During the site visit, most interviews required interpretation, which at times affected the fluidity of communication and limited the depth of discussion.
- **Internal Engagement and Understanding.** Raising awareness among university staff regarding the significance and long-term implications of institutional accreditation proved to be a critical challenge. As institutional accreditation is not yet legally mandated under Ukraine's current martial law, it required additional effort to explain its strategic value.
- **Limitations of the Hybrid Visit Format.** While the hybrid format enabled continuity under challenging circumstances, it also presented limitations. In particular, remote participation hindered some experts from gaining a comprehensive understanding of the university's physical infrastructure, including teaching laboratories and research facilities. This constrained their ability to fully assess certain aspects of the institutional environment.

Despite the challenges, LNTU's experience shows how necessary preparation, digital tools, and good communication are for successful quality assurance. The difficulties helped improve the process and inspired long-term actions — like creating digital KPI dashboards, strengthening English communication, and training staff on quality assurance culture.

Conclusion: A Best Practice in Cross-Border Quality Assurance

From NAQA's national perspective, the HAKA–NAQA institutional accreditation project stands as a best-practice example of cross-border quality assurance with an enhancement purpose. It illustrates

how international cooperation can generate systemic impact, support policy innovation, and build trust even under the most challenging conditions.

For Ukraine, the project has provided evidence that its universities are ready for institutional accreditation, validated the relevance of European standards, and built the capacity of its national QA agency to implement these procedures at scale. It has strengthened quality culture, improved reputation, and demonstrated the resilience of Ukrainian higher education.

Most importantly, the project has shown that quality assurance is not only about evaluation but also about solidarity, cooperation, and mutual learning. In this sense, the partnership with HAKA has not only prepared Ukraine for institutional accreditation but also reinforced its place in the European Higher Education Area as a trusted and proactive partner.