Cross-Institutional Findings from External Quality Assurance Reviews 2020-26 (Ten FIBAA Institutional Accreditation, Kazakhstan and Vietnam)[1]

Thematic Analysis under ESG Standard 3.4

1. Purpose and Methodology

Standard 3.4 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) requires that external quality assurance agencies "regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities." ENQA's own thematic analyses of agency review reports operationalise this standard by defining sub-themes from the descriptors in the ESG, examining how institutions and their reviewers describe practice against each sub-theme, and using panel commendations and "exceeds requirements" ratings to identify good practice, and panel recommendations and conditions to identify persistent limitations.

This analysis applies an ESG-guided comparative analysis to a set of institutional accreditation reports produced under the FIBAA (Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation) institutional accreditation procedure between 2020 and 2026. It covers ten accreditation reports: five from universities in Kazakhstan (M. Narikbayev KAZGUU University, Narxoz University, SDU University, KIMEP University, and the University of International Business) and five from universities Vietnam (University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, National Economics University, Van Lang University, VinUniversity, and Ton Duc Thang University). All ten reports were read in full and coded against eight ESG-derived sub-themes: governance and strategic management; internal quality assurance (IQA) systems; teaching, learning and student-centredness; staff and human resources; research and scientific integrity; student support services; internationalisation; and infrastructure and financial resources.

2. Sample Overview

The reviewed institutions vary considerably in ownership, size and history, but share a common accreditation instrument and a broadly comparable set of assessment criteria, which makes cross-institutional comparison meaningful.

[1] Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems were used in the preparation of this document to support analytical, drafting, or structuring tasks. All AI-generated inputs were reviewed, verified, and adapted by responsible experts in accordance with FIBAA's internal policy on the use of AI. The final content, conclusions, and responsibility remain solely with the designated authors and decision-making bodies.

Institution	Country	Type	Outcome	Accreditation period
M. Narikbayev KAZGUU University	Kazakhstan	Private (JSC)	Accredited, no conditions	2021–2027
Narxoz University	Kazakhstan	Private (Not-for-profit JSC)	Accredited, no conditions	2022–2028
University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH)	Vietnam	Public (autonomous)	Accredited under 3 conditions (fulfilled)	2022–2028
National Economics University (NEU)	Vietnam	Public (autonomous)	Accredited, no conditions	2024–2030
Van Lang University (VLU)	Vietnam	Private	Accredited, no conditions	2024–2030
VinUniversity (VinUni)	Vietnam	Private, non-profit	Accredited, no conditions	2025–2031
SDU University	Kazakhstan	Private, non-profit	Accredited under 1 condition (fulfilled)	2025–2031
KIMEP University	Kazakhstan	Private (Non-profit JSC)	Re-accredited under 3 conditions (fulfilled)	2025–2033
University of International Business (UIB)	Kazakhstan	Private (LLP)	Re-accredited, 2 conditions outstanding	2025–2033
Ton Duc Thang University (TDTU)	Vietnam	Public (self-financed)	Accredited under 2 conditions (fulfilled)	2024–2030

3. Key Thematic Findings

3.1 Governance and Strategic Management

All ten panels found governance and management structures to be functional, transparent and generally effective, and most institutions received explicit commendation for a clear, comprehensible mission statement aligned with national or regional development priorities (e.g., Narxoz's positioning as a hub for Central Asian talent, SDU's applied-research profile, VinUni's partnership-based model with Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania). At the same time, governance emerged as the theme with the most substantive conditions: KIMEP was required to redefine its strategy and to "conceptualise a well-defined governance structure," having relied on advisory committees without dedicated vice-presidential roles for teaching, research, finance or quality; UIB's panel flagged a decision-making bottleneck created by the rector's involvement in nearly every committee and recommended establishing a university council. A recurring recommendation across KAZGUU, NEU, VLU and KIMEP was to strengthen student representation in governance and quality-related bodies, where student seats were often limited to one or two members on councils otherwise dominated by faculty and administrators.

3.2 Internal Quality Assurance Systems

Every institution operates an IQA system broadly modelled on the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, and several — Narxoz, NEU, SDU and VinUni — had specific IQA criteria rated as "exceeding" requirements, often citing self-developed digital QA platforms (SDU's in-house QMS software; UIB's Academo platform) as a distinguishing strength. The most consistent limitation, however, was an incomplete feedback loop: panels at SDU, VinUni, UIB and Ton Duc Thang all noted that while data is collected through surveys and evaluations, institutions do not consistently formalise how findings translate into documented action plans, pre-defined indicators, or communication back to students and staff. NEU and Narxoz were specifically asked to establish a concrete process for discussing evaluation results with students. This suggests that data collection is a widely solved problem across the sample, while closing the quality loop — converting evidence into visible, monitored action — remains the more difficult and unevenly achieved part of ESG-compliant IQA.

3.3 Teaching, Learning and Student-Centredness

Student-centred, outcome-based teaching methods (case studies, problem-based learning, active stakeholder involvement in curriculum design) were commended at every institution, and this criterion was rated as exceeding requirements at VLU and KAZGUU. Conditions in this area were comparatively rare and specific rather than systemic: UEH was required to formalise systematic workload evaluation and ensure module descriptions cite up-to-date literature; Ton Duc Thang was required to demonstrate research transfer into teaching across all its programmes, reflecting a broader pattern (see 3.5) in which research and teaching are pursued as parallel rather than integrated activities.

3.4 Staff and Human Resources

Staff qualifications were judged adequate to fully sufficient in every report, but a persistent structural weakness was the low proportion of full-time, research-active or doctorally qualified staff relative to institutions' own ambitions: SDU reported only 5% of academic staff in combined teaching-and-research positions against a self-set target of 20%; VLU and Ton Duc Thang were each encouraged to recruit more PhD-holding lecturers; Narxoz was asked to increase the number of successful PhD graduates retained as junior staff. UIB's panel additionally flagged roughly 20% annual staff turnover linked to routine use of one-year contracts, a retention risk not raised elsewhere in the sample. SDU was the only institution where the panel raised gender parity in leadership as a distinct recommendation, noting under-representation of women in management roles.

3.5 Research and Scientific Integrity

Every institution for which multi-year data was available reported substantial growth in internationally indexed (Scopus/ISI) publications over the review period — a four- to tenfold increase in most cases (NEU: 27 to 206 articles, 2017–2022; UEH: 47 to 507, 2017–2021) — and all ten have adopted research-integrity safeguards such as plagiarism-detection software, research ethics or integrity committees, and codes of academic conduct. Despite this growth, panels repeatedly noted that research strategies remain fragmented or insufficiently integrated with teaching (KIMEP was asked to develop "a comprehensive research strategy" and appoint a Vice President for Research; Ton Duc Thang and UIB were cautioned against over-reliance on publication counts as the primary measure of research quality). VinUni and SDU, the two most recently reviewed institutions, were commended most strongly on research strategy, both receiving "exceeds requirements" ratings.

3.6 Student Support Services

Career, academic and psychological support services were consistently well regarded, with VLU, Narxoz, KIMEP and VinUni all receiving "exceeds requirements" ratings for services or public information. VinUni's panel raised a distinct and urgent concern about student wellbeing, recommending an immediate review of workload and ambition levels to prevent "systemic overload" among students — the only mental-health-driven recommendation of this severity in the sample, though Narxoz's panel also asked for further evaluation of career-service capacity given its direct link to graduate employment outcomes.

3.7 Internationalisation

All ten institutions reported growing networks of international partnership agreements (ranging from tens to several hundred MOUs), yet actual international student enrolment remained low in absolute terms at most institutions — VinUni (around 4% of the student body), NEU (85 international students in 2022, up from 38 in

2020) and UEH (few international students despite 120-plus partner countries) all drew recommendations to define concrete international target groups or accelerate internationalisation measures. The exception was UIB, where a large international cohort (693 students) was concentrated almost entirely in a single, newly established Medical School that had not been disclosed to FIBAA during the prior accreditation cycle and was consequently excluded from the accreditation's scope pending separate medical-programme review.

3.8 Infrastructure and Financial Resources

Physical infrastructure was uniformly rated as adequate to exceptional, with newer or heavily invested campuses (VinUni, SDU, VLU, Ton Duc Thang) singled out for praise and QS 5-star or similar external recognitions cited as corroborating evidence. Financing models varied by ownership type — tuition dependency ranged from roughly 70% (UEH) to over 95% (KIMEP, Ton Duc Thang, KAZGUU) of institutional revenue — but every institution's finances were judged secure for the accreditation period, and no report raised financial sustainability as a condition.

4. Cross-Cutting Statistical Patterns

Table 2 summarises the quantitative patterns that recur most strongly across the ten reports and that, taken together, characterise the current state of institutional quality assurance practice in this sample.

Indicator	Range / value across sample	Notes
Enrolment (headcount)	~2,600 – 40,000+ students	VLU/NEU/TDTU/UEH are large (26,000–40,000+); KIMEP, VinUni, KAZGUU, UIB are considerably smaller (2,600–3,300)
Graduate employment rate	~78% – 100%	Consistently reported as high across all ten institutions, typically measured 6–12 months after graduation
Growth in indexed research output	4–10× increase since ~2017–2018	e.g., NEU: 27→206 ISI/Scopus articles (2017–2022); UEH: 47→507 (2017–2021); similar multi-fold growth at Narxoz, SDU, VLU, TDTU
Institutions accredited with conditions	5 of 10 (50%)	UEH, SDU, KIMEP, UIB, TDTU; all except UIB had conditions confirmed fulfilled at the time of reporting
Most frequent condition/recommendation theme	IQA feedback loops & student participation	Formalising how evaluation results are communicated back to students/staff, and giving students seats in QA/governance bodies

Exactly half of the reviewed institutions (5 of 10) were accredited subject to conditions, and in every one of those cases the condition concerned either the internal quality assurance feedback loop, governance/strategy formalisation, or research-teaching integration — not resource adequacy, staff qualifications, or student services, which were the themes most consistently rated favourably across the whole sample. This distribution suggests that, within this cohort, the ESG "process" standards (internal QA, governance) are harder to satisfy fully than the ESG "capacity" standards (staff, infrastructure, finances).

5. Recommendations

The analysis identifies several practical lessons that can support higher education institutions preparing for or undergoing FIBAA institutional accreditation.

A first key takeaway is that **the internal quality assurance (IQA) feedback loop should be treated as a strategic governance mechanism rather than merely a process of collecting data**. Good practice involves establishing clear responsibilities for reviewing survey and evaluation results, defining regular review cycles, and ensuring that decisions and resulting improvement measures are communicated transparently to students, staff and other stakeholders. Institutions that provide visible evidence of the feedback loop—for example through public dashboards, annual quality reports or published summaries of improvement actions—are better able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems.

A second lesson concerns **meaningful stakeholder participation in governance**. Student and external stakeholder involvement was the most frequently recurring recommendation across the reviewed accreditation procedures, regardless of institutional size, ownership or national context. Good practice therefore goes beyond formal representation and ensures that stakeholders actively contribute to quality assurance processes and institutional decision-making through clearly defined roles, responsibilities and participation mechanisms.

A third takeaway relates to **the strategic governance of research**. Institutions should recognise research development and the integration of research and teaching as explicit institutional responsibilities. Rather than allowing research activities to evolve organically alongside teaching, good practice is to establish clear organisational ownership, for example through dedicated research leadership roles, defined research strategies and formal monitoring mechanisms.

The findings also provide useful guidance for FIBAA and for future thematic analyses conducted under ESG Standard 3.4.

First, the analysis indicates that accreditation conditions arise more frequently from weaknesses in **IQA feedback mechanisms and governance structures** than from limitations in institutional resources. Future guidance, workshops and pre-review support could therefore place greater emphasis on these areas, helping institutions address common challenges before the external review and potentially reducing the number of conditions imposed during accreditation.

This finding, however, should be interpreted with some caution. As a quality assurance agency, FIBAA places particular emphasis on governance, quality assurance processes, and effective feedback mechanisms in its assessment practice, which may contribute to their more frequent identification of IQA weaknesses. The profile of FIBAA’s internationally oriented clients may also introduce a selection effect: institutions seeking international accreditation are often among the stronger institutions in their respective national systems and may consequently have relatively well-developed financial and institutional resources from the outset. Finally, assessments of institutional resources are frequently informed by national regulatory requirements. For example, where an institution meets nationally established requirements regarding student–staff ratios, experts are generally unlikely to identify this area as requiring further action. These factors should therefore be considered when interpreting the comparatively low frequency of accreditation conditions related to institutional resources.

Second, the analysis highlights a noticeable gap between the expansion of **international cooperation agreements** and the comparatively limited evidence of **actual international student mobility**, as discussed in Section 3.7. This suggests the value of a dedicated thematic analysis focusing on the outcomes and effectiveness of internationalisation strategies rather than solely on the existence of international partnerships. Examining a broader range of institutions would help determine whether this represents a broader structural trend within the higher education systems concerned or is specific to the institutions included in the present analysis.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that successful institutional quality assurance depends less on the availability of resources than on the maturity of governance structures, the effectiveness of feedback and communication mechanisms, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and the strategic alignment of institutional priorities with continuous quality enhancement.

6. Conclusion

Across five Kazakhstani and five Vietnamese institutions reviewed under the FIBAA institutional accreditation procedure between 2020 and 2026, external quality assurance findings show a consistent overall profile: strong, well-resourced institutions with clear missions, adequate staff and facilities, and high graduate employability, whose principal quality assurance challenges lie not in capacity but in process — closing feedback loops, formalising governance, integrating research with teaching, and giving students a genuine voice in quality assurance.

Consistent with ENQA's approach to thematic analysis under ESG Standard 3.4, the identification of recurring strengths, challenges, and areas for enhancement across otherwise diverse institutions is intended to generate evidence that extends beyond the findings of any single review. By revealing patterns that recur across different institutional, national, and organisational contexts, the analysis can help universities benchmark their own practices, recognise systemic risks, and prioritise improvement measures. At the same time, it can support the accrediting agency in refining its criteria, guidance, expert training, and follow-up activities, thereby enabling future quality-enhancement efforts to be more targeted, evidence-based, and strategically aligned.