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AUTHORIZATION OF NEW HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN ABU DHABI

Standards & Procedure Manual – **2023**

| Foreword

This procedure manual presents the 2023 edition of the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) standards and procedures for obtaining a "No Objection Letter" (NOL) to establish and offer a new study and/or academic program (undergraduate level and above) in the Emirate.
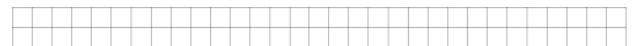
The ADEK NOL is a prerequisite to apply to the Ministry of Education (MOE) Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) for Initial Program Accreditation (IPA). No entity (i.e., individuals, institutions, providers, consortia, or organizations) is allowed to advertise, solicit, recruit, enroll, or operate a new study and/or academic program (undergraduate level and above) in Abu Dhabi without prior authorization by ADEK.

The ADEK standards and procedures for authorization of new higher education programs are developed based on the contextual and strategic needs of the higher education (HE) system in Abu Dhabi. They were benchmarked with international best practices to promote enhancement and excellence in HE provisions and to obtain recognition regionally and internationally. They also underwent a wide stakeholder consultation in the Emirate, harnessing valuable insights from HE providers, policymakers, and educationalists at large.

Our approach to a new higher education program is driven by aspirations of:
• Enhancing the quality, relevance, and efficiency of higher education programs
• Promoting the quality of educational provisions
• Increasing access to higher education
• Promoting excellence and competitiveness regionally and internationally
• Acknowledging the continually increasing diversity in HE provisions
• Supporting the development of a knowledge-based society
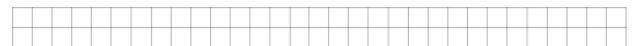
This procedure manual applies to all entities interested in establishing and offering new higher education programs in Abu Dhabi – federal, Abu Dhabi government-funded, inbound, and outbound cross-border higher education (CBHE) providers and private higher education institutions. This manual is subject to regular revisions to ensure its lasting value, validity, and relevance to socio-economic and cultural needs.

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I.   Introduction

The Abu Dhabi higher education ecosystem is governed by the External Quality Assurance Framework (EQAF), which requires a two-phased approach in which HE provisions in the Emirate must be authorized by ADEK prior to proceeding with MoE licensure and accreditation at the federal level.

All entities (federal government-funded, Abu Dhabi government-funded, inbound, and outbound CBHEs, and private institutions) wanting to establish and offer a new study and/or academic program (undergraduate level and above) in Abu Dhabi, must undergo a quality review by ADEK to obtain an NOL, prior to proceeding with the CAA procedures.

The EQAF is composed of two phases:

Phase 1 covers the following key procedures under ADEK's jurisdiction:

- Authorization of new HEIs
- Re-authorization of HEIs
- Authorization of new higher education programs
- Authorization of substantive changes

This phase and procedures serve the purpose to ensure *fitness-**of**-purpose*, through which a higher education institutional performance is evaluated based on its alignment with Abu Dhabi's strategic priorities and its fitness to serve the socio-economic and cultural needs of Abu Dhabi.

Phase 2 covers the following key procedures under the MoE CAA jurisdiction:

- Initial Institutional Licensure for new HEIs
- Licensure and Renewal of Licensure for existing HEIs
- Initial Program Accreditation
- Accreditation and Renewal of Accreditation for existing programs

On the other hand, this phase and procedures serve the purpose to ensure *fitness-**for**-purpose*, whereby an institution is evaluated per the extent to which it and/or its program(s) are fit for the *purpose/mission* it has been established for.

While distinctive in nature, both the ADEK and CAA procedures are complementary, ensuring a holistic approach to QA in Abu Dhabi.

II. New Higher Education Program Authorization

Applicable to all new study and/or academic programs (undergraduate level and above), ADEK's framework for program authorization focuses on three distinctive higher education aspects:

1. **Teaching and learning**
2. **Research**
3. **Service to society**
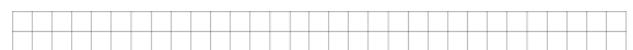
To ensure coherence with the Abu Dhabi strategic priorities and good practices in QA internationally, the ADEK new higher education program authorization procedure is underpinned by the following major principles:

- Independence
- Consistency & Alignment
- Transparency & Integrity
- Relevance & Value added
- Enhancement
- Impact

This review process is guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent does the program meet the socio-economic and cultural needs of Abu Dhabi and is the business case of the program sustainable and feasible?
2. How does the program fit the strategic development scheme of Abu Dhabi and what is its market niche?
3. What is the program's value-add compared to the similar existing ones (if any) and/or what is its differentiated edge?
4. What are the goals and objectives of the program?
5. What are the learning outcomes and qualifications the program aims to offer?
6. Are there enough existing/planned resources to ensure students achieve the set learning outcomes?
7. Is the funding model of the program feasible and sustainable?
8. How does the program management intend to safeguard and enhance the quality of its provisions?
9. What is the program's potential in terms of its competitiveness and recognition (nationally, regionally, and internationally)?

The above-outlined questions are translated into standards and sub-standards mandatory for obtaining ADEK's authorization to operate a new HE program.

The ADEK authorization of a new higher education program consists of a self-evaluation report (SER), as well as a mandatory external review and, if applicable, a site visit.

Applications can either be filed individually (per program) or in a cluster of up to five (no more) subject-related (e.g., specific areas and qualifications) programs.
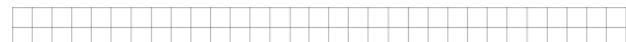
III.   The Evaluation Framework

This section introduces the standards and sub-standards that applications will be evaluated against. The standards take a modular approach to support the diversification of HE provisions and address the needs of each HEI as per their specific and unique profiles. The standards are broken down into the following modules:

✱ **Module A:** Generic standards that refer to all types and levels of programs **(mandatory for all)**

✱ **Module B:** Standards mandatory for graduate-level programs

✱ **Module C:** Standards mandatory for doctoral-level programs

Table 1: Modules & Standards

MODULE A **Generic**	MODULE B **Graduate Programs**	MODULE C **Doctoral Programs**
Mandatory to all types of HE programs	Additional and mandatory only to HEIs aiming to establish and offer graduate-level programs	Additional and mandatory only to HEIs intending to offer doctoral-level programs
This encompasses: • Alignment with socio-economic and cultural needs • Governance & administration • Sustainable and differentiated provision • Program • Research, innovation, & development • Resources • Recognition of qualifications • Quality assurance	This encompasses: • Program	This encompasses: • Program

Judgments

ADEK's decision to authorize a new higher education program is carried out on a three-point scale. The following interpretation of the three-point scale underpins the logic of external evaluation done by the External Review Panel (ERP):

- **Meets the standard:** The application is justified and provides the necessary analysis and evidence (from a content and technical perspective) that proves compliance with all standards and guidelines, as well as demonstrates added value and relevance to the socio-economic and cultural needs of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

- **Partially meets the standard:** The application clearly states the socio-economic, cultural, and market needs, and the HEI's added value and impact are explicit. However, there are administrative and technical issues still to be addressed to meet all standards and guidelines.

- **Does not meet the standard:** The submission shows clear deficiencies, including but not limited to the application and supporting documents, and fails to justify the impact, socio-economic, cultural, and market needs, as well as the necessary capacity to offer educational provisions.

External reviewers are asked to provide a list of major findings, along with a substantiated analysis and a list of commendations and recommendations (for follow-up and enhancement) for each of their judgments.

Based on the desk review and site visit (if applicable) of at least three external reviewers, the ERP Chair develops a final joint report for the ADEK Higher Education Authorization Committee (HEAC) to take a decision.

IV. The Procedure

This section outlines the procedure step-by-step:

Stage 1		
Step 1 **Application Preparation**	Description:	The HEI planning to establish and offer a new study and/or academic program (undergraduate level and above) in Abu Dhabi, should file an application to ADEK based on the standards specified in this manual. The application should include an analytical SER that adheres to ADEK standards for authorization of new higher education programs. The application should be submitted through the ADEK Higher Education Authorization Portal. An applicant planning to establish or offer a new HE program in health and medical sciences in Abu Dhabi should submit a no objection statement (e.g., a Letter of No Objection) from respective federal and Abu Dhabi authorities. If required, ADEK will coordinate additional internal approvals (e.g., ADEK Infrastructure and Facilities Division to proceed with the location grant request).
	Responsability:	HEI
	Inputs:	ADEK application package for authorization of a new HE program
	Outputs:	• Filled and submitted ADEK application package for a new HE program • SER
	Timeline:	Four months prior to the planned submission for Initial Program Accreditation by the CAA

Step 2 **Technical Review**	Description:	ADEK HERL Division Director assigns the ADEK Procedure Coordinator, who receives and reviews the application along with the required supporting documents for technical compliance.
	Responsability:	• ADEK HERL Division Director • ADEK Head of QC • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
	Inputs:	• ADEK application package for a new HE program • SER
	Outputs:	ADEK Technical Compliance Report/ADEK Technical Non-Compliance Report
	Timeline:	Two weeks after the receipt of the application
Step 3 **Revision of Application** **(if needed)**	Description:	In case of detection of any non-compliances, the applicant needs to revise and resubmit the application to ADEK within two weeks upon receiving the ADEK Technical Non-Compliance Report. This deadline may be extended by a maximum of two additional weeks, provided ADEK receives a clear justification and evidence for the extension request in writing prior to the initial deadline expiry.
	Responsability:	• HEI • ADEK Head of QC • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
	Inputs:	• ADEK Technical Non-Compliance Report • Request for extension (if required)
	Outputs:	Revised application submitted to ADEK
	Timeline:	Two weeks after the receipt of the ADEK Technical Non-Compliance Report
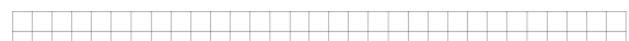
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Step 4 **Technical Review** **(if needed)**	Description:	ADEK Procedure Coordinator receives and reviews the re-submitted application along with the required supporting documents for technical compliance with the ADEK requirements.
	Responsability:	• ADEK HERL Division Director • ADEK Head of QC • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
	Inputs:	Revised application submitted to ADEK
	Outputs:	ADEK Technical Compliance Report
	Timeline:	Two weeks after the receipt of the application

Step 5 **Selection & Appointment of External Reviewers**	Description:	The ADEK Procedure Coordinator identifies potential external reviewers and submits the list for approval to ADEK HERL Division Director. External reviewers are contracted and sign the required documents (see inputs below).
	Responsability:	• ADEK HEAC Chairperson • ADEK HERL Division Director • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
	Inputs:	• ADEK policy and procedure for external reviewer selection • Shortlist of external reviewers • ADEK non-disclosure/confidentiality statements • ADEK conflict of interest statement • External reviewer's service commitment statement • ADEK internal memo Template for appointing external reviewers
	Outputs:	• Approved ADEK internal memo (letter) appointing external reviewers • ADEK agreement with external reviewers • Signed ADEK non-disclosure/confidentiality statement • Signed ADEK conflict of interest statement • Signed external reviewer's service commitment statement
	Timeline:	One week after the submission of the shortlist to the ADEK HEAC the external reviewers' panel is appointed.

Step 6 **Submission of Application for External Desk Review**	Description:	The full application package is submitted to the external reviewers for desk review.
	Responsability:	• ADEK Head of QC • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
	Inputs:	• The application package • ADEK external reviewer's template and guidelines
	Outputs:	The application package assigned to the ERP
	Timeline:	Within one week of the ERP appointment
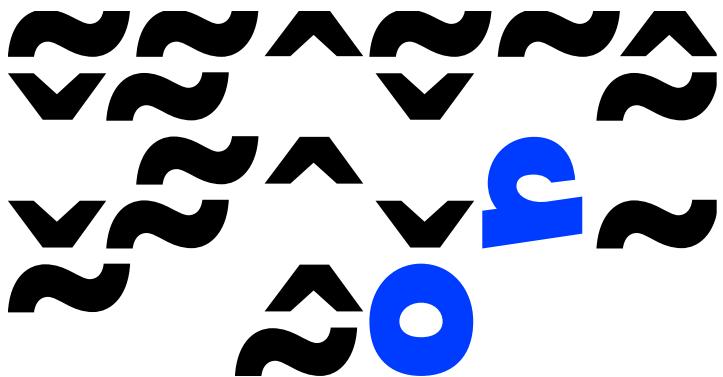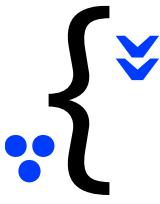
Step 7 **External Desk Review**	Description:	External reviewers conduct the desk review. Close to the end of the review, a one-day session takes place to discuss major findings and areas of further inquiry during the site visit (if any). This meeting is jointly led by the ADEK Head of QC and Procedure Coordinator and joined by local and international reviewers.
	Responsability:	• ERP • ADEK Procedure Coordinator • ADEK Head of QC
	Inputs:	N/A
	Outputs:	• Individual external reviewer reports • Joint draft report with major findings, including a summary table with external review results, areas to be further explored, comments, and recommendations
	Timeline:	4 weeks after receiving the application package
Step 8 **Site Visit (optional & based on external reviewers' request)**	Description:	A one-day session takes place to discuss major findings and areas of further inquiry during the site visit (if needed). Led by the ADEK Procedure Coordinator, the ERP undertakes a site visit (either physically or online) to verify and scrutinize provided application data, meet stakeholders and further investigate areas that are not clearly covered in the application package.
	Responsability:	• ERP • ADEK Procedure Coordinator • ADEK Head of QC
	Inputs:	Individual external reviewer reports
	Outputs:	Joint draft report with major findings, including a summary table with external review results, areas to be further explored, comments, and recommendations
	Timeline:	Up to 5 working days

Step 9 **Joint Report Preparation**	Description:	The ERP Chair prepares a joint report and submits it to the ADEK HEAC for decision-making. The joint report is circulated to all external reviewers for confirmation.
	Responsability:	• ERP Chair • ADEK Procedure Coordinator • ADEK Head of QC • ADEK HERL Division Director
	Inputs:	Joint report template
	Outputs:	Joint draft report with major findings, including a summary table with external review results, areas to be further explored, comments, and recommendations
	Timeline:	Within two weeks after the site visit (if any)
Step 10 **Decision Taking**	Description:	The final joint report is submitted to the ADEK HEAC for decision-making.
	Responsability:	• ADEK HEAC • ADEK HEAC Secretary • ADEK HERL Division Director
	Inputs:	The joint report
	Outputs:	Session minutes and decisions (i.e., NOL/NAL to be issued)
	Timeline:	Within one month of submitting the joint report
Step 11 **Applicant Notification**	Description:	The respective ADEK letter (i.e., NOL, NAL, Revise, Resubmit, or Recommendation) is issued, signed by the ADEK HEAC Chairperson, and sent to the applicant. It will specify the grounds for the decision and reflect the status **(meets, partially meets, does not meet the standards)**
	Responsability:	• ADEK HEAC Chairperson • ADEK HERL Division Director • ADEK Head of QC • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
	Inputs:	ADEK NOL/NAL/Revise & Resubmit letter template
	Outputs:	• ADEK NOL/NAL/Revise & Resubmit letter (if applicable)
	Timeline:	Within one week of making the decision

Step 12 **CAA Notification**	Description:	Once the decision is taken, ADEK informs the CAA of the results for their consideration.
	Responsability:	• ADEK HEAC Secretary • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
	Inputs:	• CAA sample letter • NOL/NAL template/ Revise & Resubmit letter template
	Outputs:	• Letter to the CAA • ADEK NOL/NAL • Letter of recommendation and follow-up (if applicable)
	Timeline:	Within one week of making the decision
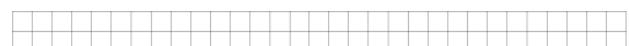
V. Standards

Module A: Generic Standards

Heading	Standards
1. **Fitness to Socio-economic & Cultural Needs**	1. **Alignment with Abu Dhabi strategic priorities:** The HEI clearly demonstrates how the new program goals and objectives are aligned with Abu Dhabi's strategic, economic, social, and cultural development priorities and needs. 2. **Response to socio-economic and cultural needs:** The HEI ensures a clear articulation of the socio-economic and cultural needs that the program fulfills. 3. **Employability of graduates:** The HEI has a robust system for tracking its alumni and employability of graduates, leading to a better understanding of how learning outcomes contribute to Abu Dhabi's socio-economic needs.
2. **Sustainable and Differentiated Provision**	1. **Value-add of the program:** The HEI provides a comprehensive analysis of how the proposed program is different from existing programs offered in Abu Dhabi or in other AUE HEIs and how its uniqueness will add scope and value to existing provisions. 2. **Feasibility and sustainability of the program:** The HEI ensures that the proposed program is feasible and sustainable in the short, medium, and long term.
3. **Programs**	1. **Alignment with the qualifications framework:** The HEI ensures that the learning outcomes of the program are in line with the Emirates Qualifications Framework (QFEmirates) at the defined level and ensure the development of skills in the field of research and/or professional practice. The HEI also demonstrates a strong capacity to assume responsibility for ensuring that the program is designed to meet new challenges and includes appropriate further learning opportunities for students. 2. **Learning outcomes:** The HEI ensures that the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the program are clearly stated with regard to knowledge, skills, and competencies and that they are aligned with the QFEmirates and international best practices. 3. **Entry requirements:** The HEI clearly outlines entry requirements for the proposed program in line with the QFEmirates.

		4. **Relevance of the curriculum:** The HEI has robust procedures in place to ensure meaningful and tangible stakeholder engagement leading to enhanced relevance of the proposed curriculum content and learning outcomes. The HEI ensures that the relevance of the learning outcomes is verified by respective industry representatives.
		5. **Academic integrity:** The HEI implements robust policies, procedures, monitoring, and review mechanisms to underpin academic integrity including admission, teaching and learning, and research integrity in all modes of delivery.
		6. **Awarded qualifications:** The HEI ensures robust policies and procedures are in place for awarded qualifications to be recognized at national, regional, and international levels.
4.	**Research, Innovation, & Development**	1. **Promotion of research, innovation, and development:** The HEI deploys mechanisms and processes that support research profiles and activities, enhance research quality and productivity, as well as promote innovation and development.
		2. **Research outputs and outcomes:** The HEI deploys mechanisms and processes that ensure the research outputs and outcomes are visible and impactful at the national, regional, and international levels.
5.	**Resources**	1. **Faculty and staff:** The HEI has distinct policies and procedures to employ qualified and sufficient faculty and staff to deliver its programs, to ensure competent instruction and competitive research. The policies address faculty and staff appraisal and professional development. The HEI also deploys faculty and staff appraisals and professional development mechanisms.
		2. **Learning resources:** The HEI secures student access to learning/information resources (e.g., library, laboratories, including resources to support accessibility for Students of Determination (SoD) where required) to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes and the attainment level of curriculum delivery.
		3. **Student services:** The HEI secures access to student support services necessary to ensure the learning expected of its students, as well as to promote their career aspirations and their wellbeing. Student support services should also be aware of how to support and guide SoD in their career aspirations

	4. Physical campus and facilities: The HEI has a purpose-built campus and facilities with adequate and relevant physical resources to ensure a constructive and accessible learning environment for students and faculty members.	
	5. Financial capacity: The HEI presents solid evidence that it is financially capable of fulfilling its commitments to program delivery in the longer term and demonstrates long-term financial viability.	
6. Recognition of Qualifications	**1. Alignment with the UN regional and global conventions:** The HEI proves that its policies, procedures, and plans are guided by respective UN regional and global conventions for recognition of qualifications to ensure its outcomes and outputs (teaching and learning, research, service to the society) are recognized nationally, regionally, and internationally.	
	2. Recognition of awarded qualifications: The HEI has robust policies and procedures in place to ensure the recognition of awarded qualifications at national, regional, and international levels.	
7. Quality Assurance	**1. Quality assurance of programs:** The HEI has robust policies and procedures for the design, approval, monitoring, review, and enhancement of its programs in place.	
	2. Evaluation of programs: The HEI ensures a well-planned, robust process for assessing the effectiveness of programs, as well as national and international accreditations (if applicable) internally and externally, It also has a plan in place that safeguards and enhances the quality of existing provisions.	
	3. National and international accreditations: The HEI has a strong track record of national and international accreditations of its existing programs and has a robust plan for ensuring national and international accreditations of the new programs (if applicable).	

Module B: Standards for Graduate-Level Programs
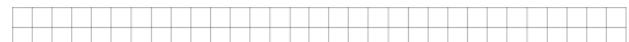
Heading	Standards
Program	1. **Capacity and agility:** The HEI ensures that the graduate-level program is in line with the strategies of the HEIs and those of Abu Dhabi. The HEI demonstrates a strong capacity to assume responsibility for ensuring that the graduate program is designed to meet new challenges and includes appropriate professional career development opportunities. 2. **Alignment with socio-economic and cultural needs: :** The HEI demonstrates that the graduate-level program is designed in a way that promotes systematic understanding and the advancement of knowledge, skills, and competencies through structured research, training, and application, and also meets socio-economic and cultural needs. 3. **Skillset development:** The HEI ensures that the program accommodates interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary training and the development of research skills. 4. **Faculty:** The HEI secures highly qualified faculty members to fulfill the crucial role of graduate students' supervision/advisory support and assessment. The faculty has a strong research background in the relevant field(s). 5. **Resource allocation:** The HEI demonstrates that its resource allocations are appropriate for the development and delivery of high-quality graduate programs. The allocated funding ensures sustainability in the provisions and student success in achieving the intended learning outcomes. 6. **Program competitiveness:** The HEI has set mechanisms for promoting ongoing enhancement and competitiveness of its graduate programs nationally, regionally, and internationally.

Module C: Standards for Doctoral-Level Programs

Heading	Standards
Program	1. **Capacity and agility:** The HEI demonstrates a strong capacity to assume responsibility for ensuring that doctoral programs and research training are designed to meet new challenges and include appropriate professional career development opportunities.
	2. **Research orientation:** The HEI ensures that the doctoral program is designed in a way to promote the advancement of knowledge through original research and increasingly meets socio-economic and cultural needs.
	3. **Skillset development:** The HEI ensures that the program accommodates interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary training and the development of advanced research skills.
	4. **Research engagement:** The HEI proves that doctoral candidates (PhD and professional) are enrolled as researchers in the relevant field and are recognized as professionals – with commensurate rights - who make a key contribution to the creation of new knowledge.
	5. **Supervision:** The HEI has robust policies and procedures for doctoral student supervision, which enables the necessary research capacity and leads to meaningful contributions to the body of knowledge.
	6. **Faculty:** The HEI secures highly qualified faculty members to fulfill the role of doctoral candidate supervision and assessment, which is based on a transparent framework of shared responsibilities between doctoral candidates, supervisors, and the institution (and where appropriate including other partners).
	7. **Resource allocation:** The HEI demonstrates that resource allocations are appropriate for the development and delivery of high-quality doctoral programs. It also ensures that the allocated program funding ensures sustainability in the provisions and successful completion by doctoral candidates.
	8. **Program competitiveness:** The HEI has put in place mechanisms to ensure ongoing enhancement and competitiveness of its doctoral programs nationally, regionally, and internationally.

VI. Related Expenses

Considering the authorization process is conducted with the involvement of external reviewers, the following expenses apply and must be covered by the applicant:

◉ Application handling fees
◉ External reviewer fees
◉ Local and international travel expenses for experts in case a site visit is required

Each review will be calculated individually, with costs varying depending on the nature of the procedure and the number of external reviewers.

VII. The External Reviewers

Composition of the External Review Panel

To ensure an independent and objective review and decision-making, the external reviews are conducted by an independent ERP, which is assisted by the ADEK Procedure Coordinator, assigned once the application is filed.

External reviewers must meet the following requirements:

◉ The panel should include at least three members - local and international.
◉ In a cluster of programs/concentrations, i.e., a group of programs or concentrations that belong to the same subject field, the number of peer-reviewers assigned per case might vary.
◉ The panel should possess the following complementary skills and competencies:

- Expertise in recent developments in higher education and research in the field of study
- International expertise and practical experience in the field of higher education governance and administration
- Experience in teaching and learning
- Skills in developing study programs
- Good knowledge of student-centered approaches
- Expertise in QA (i.e., conducting program audits and/or evaluations)

- Panel members should have complementary skills and competencies.

- The panel should be chaired by one of the panel members based on an internal agreement between the panel members themselves or the chair is appointed by ADEK's Procedure Coordinator.

- The panel's independence is guided by the ADEK Conflict of Interest Policy and ERP members must sign a declaration of independence/conflict of interests and confidentiality prior to commencing the review process.

External Reviewer Qualifications

External reviewers, both national and international, must possess the following qualifications to be eligible for ERP selection:

Administrators & managers:
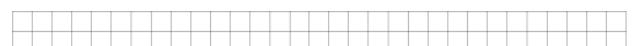
- A PhD in the related field of study
- A proven track record of experience in higher education management
- At least 5 years of teaching is desirable
- Experience in developing study/academic programs
- Experience in review and QA (desirable)
- Fluency in English is mandatory, fluency in Arabic is preferred

Faculty members:

- A PhD in the related field of study
- A proven track record of research conducted in the respective field of study
- At least 10 years of teaching experience
- Experience in developing study/academic programs
- Experience in review and QA (desirable)
- Fluency in English is mandatory, fluency in Arabic is preferred

Employers (if applicable):

- Be employed in a senior position in the relevant industry
- At least 10 years of experience supervising new employees and evaluating employee performance
- Teaching in respective field (desirable)
- Experience in QA (desirable)
- Fluency in English and Arabic.
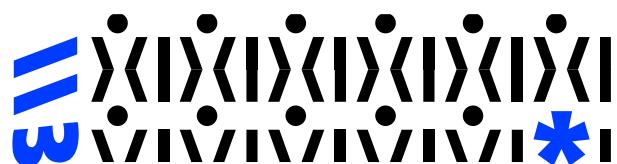
Conflict of Interest Policy and Confidentiality

A conflict of interest occurs when an external reviewer is involved in an activity, commitment, or interest that could negatively affect, compromise, or be incompatible with his/her obligations as an ADEK external reviewer:

- **A *conflict of time commitment*** occurs when the external reviewer is involved in and committed to unauthorized activities that interfere with his/her obligations to ADEK thus delaying the review procedure.

- **A *conflict of relationship interest*** occurs when an external reviewer has a relative (up to a second degree) that is employed by the HEI under scrutiny, which might restrict or impair the reviewer's ability to perform the external evaluation of the case objectively and independently.

- **A *conflict of financial interest*** occurs when an external reviewer is either employed or has been employed by the HEI for the last five years or financially benefits (either directly or indirectly) from the HEI under scrutiny.

- **A *conflict of competitor interest*** occurs when the external reviewer has an interest in producing a biased report that might question the objectivity and independence of the review.

- **A *conflict of discipline-specific interest*** occurs when the nature of the external reviewer's discipline could cause situations that, while not implicating one of the conflicts listed above, could question the independence of the review.

The ADEK Procedure Coordinator is responsible for providing verbal and written guidance to external reviewers on ADEK's Conflict of Interest Policy. External reviewers on the other hand are obliged to disclose such conflicts and sign a conflict-of-interest statement, as well as a non-disclosure/confidentiality agreement prior to their engagement.

In addition, the final joint report submitted to the ADEK HEAC for decision-taking should include a declaration that the assessment has been carried out independently and that findings may not be disclosed by any other party but ADEK.

External Reviewer Selection Procedure

The expert selection procedure has the following steps:

1. The ADEK HE Executive Director sends a nomination request, along with the external reviewer qualification requirements, to HEIs and relevant industry representatives (if any) to nominate professionals in different fields to be assessed and included in the ADEK HE expert pool. For international reviewers, the nomination request is sent to the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) and other recognized QA entities. An open call to invite external reviewers is also possible through the ADEK Higher Education Authorization Portal.

2. Once nominations have been received, ADEK contacts the nominees to submit their Curriculum Vitae (CV) along with a statement of interest to serve as an external reviewer.

3. The ADEK Head of QC collects all CVs and arranges for an initial discussion on candidates.

4. Following an initial evaluation, ADEK HERL Division reviews and shortlists the candidates. After initial induction and the approved candidates are included in the ADEK database of external reviewers.

5. Upon receiving an external review request/mandate, the ADEK Procedure Coordinator selects the external reviewers based on their qualifications from the ADEK database and conducts a conflict-of-interest check.

6. The list of proposed panel members is first submitted to the ADEK HERL Division Director for approval before sending it to the ADEK HEAC for an appointment. In case one or several candidates are rejected, replacements will be selected from the same database.

7. Once appointed, external reviewers sign the ADEK agreement/service commitment statement, a conflict-of-interest statement, as well as a non-disclosure/confidentiality agreement prior to commencing the external review.

VIII. Appeal Procedure

In case of a negative decision, the applicant appeals through the ADEK HE Appeals Committee, which is established on a case-by-case basis.

The appeal petition must be submitted in writing to the ADEK HERL Division and should be filed through the ADEK Higher Education Authorization Portal within 30 calendar days of receiving the letter of rejection.
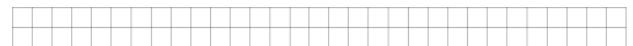
On average, the appeals process takes up to twelve weeks. Depending on the scope of the appeal, the timeline may vary.

All the expenses related to the appeals procedure are covered by the appellant (HEI).

The appeals procedure includes the below-outlined steps:

Step 1: Submit Appeal for Review

Description/ Definition:	• The appeal petition must be submitted in writing to the ADEK HERL Division Director and should be filed through the ADEK Higher Education Authorization Portal. • The letter can be up to five pages long and should include a detailed justification, substantial evidence, and facts that were available at the time of the review and that substantiate the grounds for the appeal. • The basis for appeal is the initial application submitted by the applicant. Evidence of corrective action taken in response to the findings and recommendations by the external reviewers cannot be included in the appeal process. • An appeal is only valid in case the review procedure was not properly adhered to, relevant information provided by the HEI was not considered or properly interpreted by the panel, or a judgment was made based on factually inaccurate data. • The appellant can withdraw the appeal at any time during the process. However, if the appeal is withdrawn, the ADEK HE Appeals Committee will not accept a future appeal on the same or substantially similar grounds.
Responsible:	Appellant
Inputs:	NAL
Outputs:	N/A
Timeline:	Within 30 calendar days of receiving the letter of rejection

Step 2: Receive and Review Appeal

Description/ Definition:	• The ADEK HERL Division Director receives and reviews the appeal and supporting evidence to determine its validity. • If the appeal is justified, the ADEK Procedure Coordinator is assigned to launch the appeal. • If the appeal is found not to be valid (justified), the appellant will either be notified and provided a justification or requested to elaborate on their concerns and provide further evidence within three days. The case will automatically be closed within five days if the appellant does not respond.
Responsible:	ADEK HERL Division Director
Inputs:	• NAL • Appeals petition
Outputs:	Appeals petition
Timeline:	Within one week of submitting the application

Step 3: Register Appeal, Schedule Appeals, and Prepare Response

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Description/ Definition:	• The appeal, including all supporting documents and evidence, is registered in the Appeals Register by ADEK Procedure Coordinator. • A review schedule is set by ADEK Procedure Coordinator. • The ERP is formed. • The ADEK Procedure Coordinator prepares a response letter to the appellant that outlines the review logistics and provides information about any requirements that need to be prepared and submitted. • The response letter is shared with the ADEK HERL Division Director for review.
Responsible:	• ADEK Head of QC • ADEK Procedure Coordinator
Inputs:	Appeals petition
Outputs:	Response letter
Timeline:	Within two weeks of case registration

Step 4: Approve Response
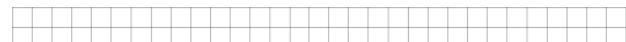
Description/ Definition:	The ADEK HERL Division Director reviews the response letter and either requests changes or approves it to be sent to the appellant.
Responsible:	ADEK HERL Division Director
Inputs:	• Response letter • Appeals petition
Outputs:	Response letter
Timeline:	Within one day of receiving the response letter

Step 5: External Review of the Case

Description/ Definition:	The case is submitted to at least three independent external reviewers for evaluation.
Responsible:	External reviewers
Inputs:	Appeals petition with all the supporting documents and evidence
Outputs:	External reviewer reports
Timeline:	Four to six weeks upon appointing the ERP depending on the scope of the appeal

Step 6: Summary of the Report

Description/ Definition:	The ADEK Procedure Coordinator prepares a summary of the external reviewer reports and sends it to the ADEK Head of QC.
Responsible:	• ADEK Procedure Coordinator • ADEK Head of QC
Inputs:	External reviewer reports
Outputs:	Summary report
Timeline:	Within one week of receiving the external reviewer reports
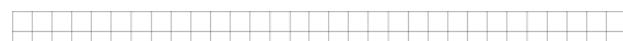
Step 7: Convention on the Appeal and Final Order

Description/ Definition:	• The ADEK HE Appeals Committee convenes to decide on the case. • The Committee's secretary takes the meeting minutes and records taken decisions. • The ADEK HE Appeals Committee renders a written decision that either upholds, amends, or overturns the recommendation/decision of the ERP. • The Committee secretary prepares the recommendation for initial endorsement to the Committee's Chair and submits it afterward to the HEAC Chairperson for sign-off.
Responsible:	HE Appeals Committee
Inputs:	Appeal's case file
Outputs:	Appeal decision
Timeline:	Within two weeks of receiving the summary report. However, in extraordinary circumstances, this timeline may be extended by the Committee's Chair if required.

Step 8: Receive Letter Overturning/Upholding Decision

Description/ Definition:	• The appellant receives the final decision made by the ADEK Undersecretary/HE Executive Director. • If ADEK's prior decision is overturned, the appellant's NOL application proceeds. • If ADEK's prior decision is upheld, the appeal case file is closed and archived. • The decision taken by the ADEK HE Appeals Committee is final and binding.
Responsible:	• HE Appeals Committee Chair • ADEK HERL Division Director
Inputs:	Appeal decision
Outputs:	NOL and NAL
Timeline:	Within one week of the decision making

ANNEX A: Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Higher Education Authorization Committee	The Higher Education Authorization Committee is a decision-making body established within the ADEK Higher Education Sector to take decisions related to the authorization of new HEIs, programs, substantive changes, and re-authorization of existing HEIs. It is comprised of the key stakeholders of the Abu Dhabi higher education system.
Academic/ study program	An academic/study program is a combination of courses and/or requirements leading to a degree.
Appeal	A procedure in which cases are reviewed in case parties involved in a procedure request a formal change to an official decision. Appeals function both as a process for error correction as well as a process of clarifying and interpreting the decision. Appeal procedures are ADEK internal.
Authorization	Authorization is a process whereby a new institution or a new academic/study program is granted a NOL to function in Abu Dhabi. It is a pre-requisite step for programs prior to their submission to the CAA for initial accreditation.
Cross-border provision	Cross-border provision of higher education comprises any educational service or higher educational learning activity that offers at least one program and/or course of study and confers higher education qualifications according to the legal provisions in force. Cross-border provision encompasses any arrangement of higher education provision or refers to any entity that delivers higher education service inbound or outbound of Abu Dhabi. Cross-border provision of higher education necessitates the establishment of a physical presence (e.g., a branch campus of the institution) in a cross-border location other than the geographical location of its parent university (e.g., HEI/provider).
External review	The process whereby the ADEK HERL Division collects data, information, and evidence about an institution, a particular unit or program of a given institution, or a core activity of an institution, to make a statement about its quality. The external review is usually based on a self-evaluation report provided by the institution and can be used as a basis for measurement metrics or as a method of judgment for (external) evaluation in higher education. ADEK provides training programs/induction prior to the evaluation to ensure their mutual understanding and the fair, consistent, appropriate, and smooth implementation of the process.
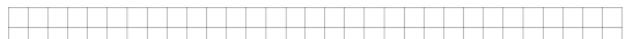
External reviewers	External evaluation is carried out by a team of external experts, peers, or professionals in the field. The external reviewers have strong backgrounds in their respective fields of study and professional experience, therefore, they come from academia for institutional authorization cases, and from academia and the labor market for external review of study/academic programs.
External review panel	The external review panel consists of up to 5 external reviewers and up to 5 faculty members, peers, and/or professionals in respective fields in case of study/academic programs. For each procedure, ADEK sets an ERP by matching the qualifications of the peers and professionals with the submitted initiatives.
Evidence-based evaluation	Evidence-based evaluation is the cornerstone of the culture of evidence. The latter is a HEI-acquired mindset based on clear ethical values, principles, and rules. It consists of the regular and thoughtful self-evaluation of the HEI's learning outcomes, engages the faculty and academic administration, and uses relevant institutional measurement metrics, in order to inform and prove, whenever (and to whomever) necessary, that it is doing well in specific areas (e.g., institutional planning, decision-making, quality, etc.) and for the purpose of improving its learning and teaching outcomes. The culture of evidence requested from the HEI implies that it is encouraged to be able to provide empirical data proving the consistency of its own mission.
Fitness-of-purpose	This is a definition of quality in higher education, which guides the principle of evaluation of the extent to which the quality-related intentions of an organization are adequate and are aligned with the priorities set in the country.
Fitness-for-purpose	This is a definition of quality in higher education, which judges the quality of a product or service in terms of the extent to which its stated purpose—defined either as meeting customer specifications or conformity with the institutional mission — is met.
Follow-up	Follow-up is shorthand for procedures to ensure that outcomes of review processes have been, or are being, addressed and supported by data-driven facts, figures, and evidence.
Guidelines	Guidelines provide a general framework of guidance, recommendations, and/or additional instructions on how to achieve a given standard. They are designed to streamline certain processes according to what the best practices are. Guidelines are not mandatory and are provided for further interpretation by HEIs providing flexibility and common sense in different circumstances and conditions, as well as guiding their decisions and achieving rational outcomes.

Higher Education Institution (HEI)	An education body that carries out higher education activities based on legally approved study programs leading to an undergraduate degree and above. Any higher education institution/provider must follow an external evaluation procedure (authorization) to assess its quality and to acquire the provisional functioning authorization, followed by its official licensure, as well as the accreditation of its study programs. HEIs/providers may differ in size, quality, resources, number of faculty and students, etc.
The Internal Quality Assurance System	A scheme that should entail the existence of a quality policy and organizational structure, as well as formal procedures, processes, mechanisms, methods, and resources that provide reliable information on the quality of the HEI's activities. It should also provide guidance and recommendations on how to improve these activities.
Procedure	A predefined, fixed, step-by-step sequence of activities or course of action (with definite start and end points) that must be followed in the same order to correctly perform an external evaluation.
QFEmirates	The single description, at national level or level of an education system, which is internationally understood and through which all qualifications and other learning achievements in higher education may be described and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between higher education qualifications. The QFEmirates Handbook sets out the policies, structures, standards, systems, and procedures for the national qualifications framework for the UAE, known as the QFEmirates. It enables a coherent, consistent, and robust approach to be taken to the design of qualifications for higher education, general education, and technical, vocational, and professional education and training. It sets out criteria for both the accreditation of qualifications and for those organizations in the public and private sectors which are to deliver them. It provides guidance and a reference tool for accreditation and awarding bodies and qualifications designers and developers.
Quality Enhancement Plan	This is a multi-year strategic document devised by the institution that focuses on well-defined areas of improvement for attaining educational goals and addresses areas of concerns identified through its ongoing, comprehensive planning, and institutional evaluation processes. The QEP also provides a framework for successful stewardship, continual assessment, and flexible modification of strategic goals and major aspects of students' educational experiences. The QEP should demonstrate broad-based engagement of institutional constituencies in the development and implementation of the QEP.

Self-evaluation	The process of self-evaluation consists of the systematic collection of administrative data, the questioning of students and graduates, and the holding of moderated interviews with lecturers and students, resulting in an evaluation report. Self-evaluation is a collective institutional reflection and an opportunity for quality enhancement. The resulting report further serves to provide information for the review team in charge of the external evaluation.
Standards	Checkpoints or benchmarks determining the attainment of certain thresholds/requirements. Standards are mandatory for compliance and describe to a certain degree of detail the characteristics of the requirements, conditions, and courses of action to be met. They, therefore, provide the quantitative and qualitative basis on which the attainment of certain thresholds/requirements is measured, and an evaluative conclusion is drawn. Standards comprise technical specifications or other precise criteria designed to be used consistently as a guideline or definition. Standards articulate the minimum thresholds/conditions that are required from any HEI in Abu Dhabi to be in compliance with the performance expectations set by ADEK.
Substantive change	Substantive change is any significant modification and expansion of the nature and/or scope of functions and operations of the existing HEI or program, for which current provisions and modalities were initially approved by ADEK. Substantive change also entails the procedure through which ADEK authorizes the proposed changes to be undertaken by the HEI between succeeding cycles of institutional re-authorization. Each substantive change undertaken by the HEI in between the two cycles of authorization must be authorized by ADEK.
Technical compliance	The first step in external evaluation by the authorization body whereby the ADEK Procedure Coordinator evaluates the submission for compliance against ADEK standards. The technical check ensures that all standards are addressed in a due manner and all the required evidence to support the statements is in place prior to sending the application to the external reviewers. The application is not sent to external reviewers if it fails to comply with ADEK standards. If the result of the technical review demonstrates that the application is incomplete and/or essential information/evidence is missing, the applicant revises the application, incorporates all recommendations, and resubmits the application within the stipulated deadline, for it to be considered for future eligibility and external review.
Wellbeing	Wellbeing encompasses special arrangements and policies that prioritize the physical, mental, and social aspects of students, faculty, and staff and promote optimal bodily health, encouraging participation in sports, extramural activities, and other recreational pursuits. These policies and activities recognize the interconnectedness of all parties involved and aim to foster a harmonious and supportive environment where everyone can flourish in terms of their physical, mental, and social wellbeing. In addressing wellbeing needs, HEIs should strive to create a positive and conducive environment for learning, teaching, and sporting excellence, aligning with the strategic priorities of Abu Dhabi.

ANNEX B: List of Acronyms

ADEK	Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge
CAA	Commission of Academic Accreditation
CBHE	Cross-border Higher Education
ERP	External Review Panel
EQAF	External Quality Assurance Framework
HEAC	Higher Education Authorization Committee
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HERL	Higher Education Regulation & Licensing
MoE	Ministry of Education
NAL	Non-Approval Letter
NOL	No Objection Letter
QA	Quality Assurance
QC	Quality Control
QEP	Quality Enhancement Plan
QFEmirates	Qualifications Framework for the Emirates
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
SoD	Students of Determination