



# SHIFT ESG CERTIFICATION for Higher Education Institutions Process Manual, Guidelines and Policies



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# 1. Introduction

This document presents the **SHIFT ESG Certification** for Higher Education Institutions and outlines the framework, methodology, and procedures governing its implementation. Developed within the SHIFT project, the certification is intended to recognize Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that have successfully implemented effective Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices and are able to demonstrate measurable institutional impact.

The certification responds to the growing need for transparent, structured, and credible mechanisms that support HEIs in assessing and advancing their ESG performance. In this context, the SHIFT project provides a comprehensive and systematic approach to ESG measurement, reporting, training, and certification. Through the ESG Impact Index Platform and its complementary tools, HEIs are enabled to assess and monitor their progress, benchmark their performance against peer institutions, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies to strengthen their ESG performance and contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The **SHIFT ESG Certification** is designed as a four-phase process. The first phase, preparation, supports institutions in conducting a self-evaluation against the ESG Impact Index Matrix through the ESG Impact Index Platform, enabling them to identify strengths and areas for development. The second phase consists of an external assessment carried out by evaluators who review institutional performance against the defined standards and criteria. The third phase, feedback and improvement, provides participating institutions with structured feedback and guidance for the development of an action plan addressing identified areas for enhancement. The final phase, certification, leads to the awarding of certification status based on the institution's demonstrated performance and fulfilment of the relevant requirements.

Beyond its function as a recognition mechanism, the certification is conceived as a developmental instrument that promotes continuous improvement and institutional learning. It supports HEIs in demonstrating accountability and transparency towards key stakeholders, including students, alumni, staff, investors, and the wider community. At the same time, it contributes to strengthening a shared understanding of ESG in higher education and fosters transnational exchange on effective approaches and practices.

In this way, the SHIFT project makes an important contribution to advancing sustainable and responsible practices in higher education. By combining assessment, capacity-building, benchmarking, and certification within a common European framework, it supports HEIs in embedding ESG considerations more systematically into their strategies and operations. The ESG certification will be piloted by universities in the SHIFT Project consortium, namely: University of Almeria, University of Lodz, Linnaeus University, and the Metropolitan University Serbia.

## 2. Certification Overview

This section provides an overview of the **SHIFT ESG Certification** and introduces the main elements that shape its design and implementation. It outlines the guiding principles of the certification, the period for which certification is awarded, and the roles and responsibilities of the actors involved in the process.

Together, these elements provide the foundation for a transparent, consistent, and credible certification framework. They clarify the purpose and logic of the certification, define its temporal scope, and establish how responsibilities are shared among applicant institutions, reviewers, and the coordinating body.

### 2.1. Principles of the SHIFT ESG Certification

The SHIFT ESG Certification is guided by principles that ensure the process is transparent, fair, evidence-based, and improvement-oriented. Certification decisions are grounded in documented institutional practice and measurable results, while also considering the diversity of higher education contexts. The process is intended not only to assess current performance, but also to encourage reflection, learning, and future development.

#### **Transparency and accountability**

The certification process is designed to be transparent at all stages. Assessment criteria, procedures, documentation requirements, and certification outcomes are clearly communicated to participating institutions. Institutions receive structured feedback explaining how certification decisions are reached, thereby strengthening accountability and trust in the process.

#### **Evidence-based assessment**

Certification decisions are grounded in qualitative evaluation data, supported by verifiable evidence, collected during the external evaluation phase.

#### **Continuous improvement orientation**

Instead of focusing solely on performance ranking, the certification process prioritises institutional learning and long-term ESG capacity building. The inclusion of structured feedback and improvement action planning aims to encourage HEIs to treat certification as part of an ongoing development cycle, supporting incremental progress and institutional transformation.

### **Inclusiveness and contextual flexibility**

The process acknowledges the diversity of higher education institutions in terms of size, governance models, funding structures, and regional contexts. Therefore, certification assessments focus on strategic alignment, implementation maturity, and progress trajectories rather than uniform institutional benchmarks. This allows institutions from different national and organisational settings to participate on equal footing.

### **Fit-for-purpose quality assurance**

The quality of the certification process is guided by predefined guidelines supporting the certification processes, including clear instructions, reporting templates, guidelines for external reviewers, and scoring criteria, described later in this report. The external evaluation processes are designed to ensure impartiality and professional integrity. External reviewers operate independently from participating institutions and follow standardized assessment procedures.

## **2.2. Certification Period**

The SHIFT ESG Certification is granted for a defined period, during which the certified institution may formally hold and communicate its certification status. The certification period is intended to provide recognition of the institution's demonstrated ESG performance while also encouraging continued development and improvement over time. This section describes the conditions for both initial certification and renewal.

### **Initial certification**

To ensure continued relevance and credibility, the SHIFT ESG Certification is granted for a defined validity period of three (3) years. This duration reflects common practice in quality assurance and certification systems and balances the need for stability with the dynamic nature of ESG performance and institutional change. Throughout the validity period, institutions are encouraged to actively monitor their ESG performances and implement improvement measures.

### **Renewal of certification**

At the end of the certification validity period, interested institutions may apply for renewal by re-entering the assessment process, beginning with an updated platform-based ESG self-assessment. Renewal provides an opportunity to demonstrate institutional progress, consolidate organisational learning, and reflect evolving ESG practices. While the SHIFT project delivers the initial certification infrastructure and

governance process, the certification methodology has been designed for long-term methodological continuity beyond the project's funding lifecycle.

### 2.3. Roles and responsibilities

The SHIFT ESG Certification process is supported by a multi-actor governance structure that distinguishes institutional responsibilities, external evaluation functions, and technical system support. This separation ensures procedural transparency, accountability, and operational reliability.

#### Participating HEIs

Participating HEIs are the primary institutional actors within the certification process. They are responsible for completing the ESG Impact Index Platform assessment, preparing the qualitative self-evaluation report, submitting supporting documentation and evidence, and developing institutional action plans in response to external reviewer feedback. HEIs also ensure internal coordination across relevant departments and leadership structures to support accurate reporting and implementation of ESG practices.

#### Expert Committee

It consist in two (2) external reviewers who are independent higher education professionals with demonstrated experience in sustainability, ESG assessment, higher education governance, social responsibility in higher education, quality assurance, or institutional evaluation. Their role is to review and assess the reports completed HEIs participating in the ESG certification (Self-Evaluation and Qualitative Institutional Evaluation), verify the credibility and relevance of supporting evidence, evaluate alignment with ESG Impact Index criteria, and provide feedback and improvement recommendations. Reviewers operate under predefined assessment guidelines and independence requirements to ensure impartiality and consistency.

#### SHIFT Certification Coordination Team

ACEEU, one of SHIFTS consortium partners, oversees the strategic and procedural implementation of the certification system. The organisation is also responsible for reviewer selection and onboarding, maintenance of evaluation standards, coordination of quality assurance procedures, validation of certification decisions, and formal issuance of certification recognition. The coordination function ensures procedural coherence and alignment with the objectives of the SHIFT project.

### 3. SHIFT ESG Certification Policies

The SHIFT ESG Certification process is guided by a set of core policies that ensure methodological robustness, institutional relevance, and long-term credibility of certification outcomes. These policies strengthen the fairness, transparency, and robustness of the framework by defining how concerns are addressed, impartiality is safeguarded, confidential information is protected, relevant information is disclosed, and institutional changes with potential implications for certification are managed.

#### **Complaints**

Participating institutions are provided with a formal mechanism to raise concerns regarding the conduct of the certification process. Complaints may relate to procedural issues, communication, or other aspects that may affect the fairness or integrity of the process. All complaints need to be sent via email to the Certification Coordination Team in a structured and timely manner, and documented to ensure transparency and traceability.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The independence and impartiality of the certification process are safeguarded through conflict-of-interest procedures. All external reviewers are required to declare any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest before taking part in an evaluation. Individuals with institutional, financial, or professional ties to an applicant institution are excluded from the review process.

#### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is maintained throughout the certification process. All certification-related documentation, including self-evaluation reports, supporting evidence, reviewer feedback, and certification decisions, is treated as confidential and handled only by authorised persons. Documentation is stored securely to protect sensitive institutional information.

#### **Disclosure**

The certification framework ensures appropriate transparency while protecting confidential information. Relevant information on procedures, criteria, and certification outcomes is disclosed in a clear and consistent manner. At the same time, institutional documentation and reviewer deliberations are not disclosed beyond the authorised certification bodies, except where required for reporting, quality assurance, or audit purposes.

## **Institutional Change**

Institutions are expected to inform the certification coordination team of any significant institutional changes that may affect their certification status or the validity of the evaluation outcome. Such changes may include major organisational restructuring, merger, changes in legal status, or substantial alterations relevant to the certification criteria.

## **Procedural Oversight**

Procedural oversight helps ensure the consistency and integrity of the certification process. All review reports and final scores are subject to validation by the certification coordination team to confirm that evaluations have been conducted in line with the established guidelines, scoring rubrics, and reporting requirements. This validation is procedural in nature and does not constitute a re-evaluation of institutional performance.

## **Appeal Mechanism**

Participating institutions may request clarification or submit a formal appeal where they identify procedural errors, misinterpretation of submitted documentation, factual inaccuracies, or inconsistencies between the evidence provided and the evaluation outcome. Appeals must clearly identify the contested elements and provide a concise justification. The appeal process is limited to reviewing potential errors or misinterpretations and may not be used to challenge the certification methodology or introduce new evidence.

## **Use and Communication of Certification Status**

Certified institutions may communicate their certified status. Any SHIFT ESG Certification reference to certification must be accurate, limited to the period of validity. Misrepresentation of certification status, including the continued use of expired or incorrect claims, is not permitted. This policy protects the credibility and integrity of the certification.

## 4. SHIFT Certification Standards and Guidelines

This section presents the standards to be used to assess institutions within the SHIFT ESG Certification. It provides guidance to support applicant institutions in preparing their Qualitative Institutional Evaluation report, and in engaging with the certification process in a consistent and informed manner.

The certification framework has been developed to enable the systematic evaluation of institutional approaches and performance around three dimensions—Environmental, Social, and Governance, which follow the ESG Impact Matrix.

### Definition of a SHIFT ESG Certified University

A SHIFT ESG Certified University is a higher education institution that demonstrates a strategic, evidence-based, and institution-wide commitment to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles, as defined by the SHIFT Impact Matrix. Through the SHIFT ESG Certification process, the institution shows that ESG considerations are embedded in its strategy, governance, operations, and organisational development, and that progress can be demonstrated through qualitative reflection and measurable results.

This includes, within the *environmental dimension*, commitment to sustainable campus operations, environmentally relevant research and innovation, and responsible procurement; within the *social dimension*, the advancement of equity and access, wellbeing, and research and innovation that contributes to societal benefit; and within the *governance dimension*, sound management and accountability, ethics and integrity, digital readiness and security, stakeholder engagement and communication, as well as responsible approaches to research, innovation, and procurement. Certification therefore, recognises not only current performance, but also the institution's capacity for accountability, continuous improvement, and long-term contribution to sustainable and responsible higher education.

### 4.1. Standards overview

This section sets out the standards against which an institution aiming at the SHIFT Certification will be evaluated and provides guidelines for the self-evaluation, structured according to the ESG Dimensions which build the Index Matrix:

- Dimension 1: Environmental
- Dimension 2: Social
- Dimension 3: Governance

Each dimension has standards covering specific areas in alignment with the ESG Impact Matrix. The institution can refer back to the Platform Self-Evaluation to identify the items included in each standard.

For the purpose of the Qualitative Institutional Assessment, each standard is defined in a way that the institution can refer to for their analysis.

Table 1. Definition of Standards

Standard	Name	Definition for Self-Evaluation
<b>Environmental</b>		
E1	Campus Operation	The university manages campus operations in a systematic and measurable way to reduce environmental impact and improve resource efficiency across land use, energy, waste, and water.
E2	Research and Innovation	The university demonstrates that its research and innovation practices are environmentally sustainable and promote climate resilience.
E3	Procurement	The university applies procurement practices in a systematic and measurable way to reduce environmental impact in daily operations, promote responsible sourcing, and strengthen sustainability across its supply chains.
<b>Social</b>		
S1	Equity and Access	The university promotes equity and access through inclusive policies, support structures, and measurable actions that widen participation and reduce barriers for diverse learners and staff.
S2	Wellbeing	The university fosters the wellbeing of students and staff through supportive policies, services, and practices that promote physical, mental, and social health in a safe and inclusive environment.
S3	Research and Innovation	The university ensures that its research, innovation, and academic practices involve all actors, and contribute to social inclusion, societal wellbeing, and positive impact for communities and stakeholders.
<b>Governance</b>		
G1	Management and Accountability	The university ensures effective management and accountability through transparent structures, clear responsibilities, and evidence-based processes that support the achievement of ESG objectives.
G2	Ethics and Integrity	The university upholds ethics and integrity through clear standards, responsible conduct, and institutional mechanisms that promote fairness, trust, and compliance in decision-making and practice.

G3	Digital Readiness and Security	The university strengthens digital readiness and security through robust systems, policies, and capacities that support secure, reliable, and responsible digital transformation
G4	Stakeholder Engagement and Communication	The university engages stakeholders in a meaningful and transparent way and communicates its ESG priorities, actions, and progress clearly to internal and external audiences.

## 4.2. Guidance for Qualitative Institutional Evaluation

For each of the standards outlined above, institutions are expected to provide a concise qualitative assessment of their current situation and level of development. The qualitative evaluation should explain how the institution addresses the respective standard in practice and should be grounded in institutional strategy, available resources, and existing capabilities.

In preparing the Qualitative Evaluation Report, institutions should first describe the relevant strategic approach, including policies, objectives, structures, responsibilities, and support mechanisms related to the standard. They should also explain the resources and capabilities in place to support implementation, such as staff expertise, organisational arrangements, financial resources, infrastructure, or institutional processes.

The qualitative narrative should be supported by evidence from the SHIFT Impact Matrix. Institutions are expected to review the relevant quantitative data and use it to substantiate their assessment, demonstrate progress, and justify claims made in the narrative. References to the relevant areas of the matrix should therefore be included wherever appropriate.

At the same time, institutions may complement the information from the matrix with additional elements that reflect their own context. This may include institutional characteristics, strategic priorities, specific initiatives, or contextual factors that help explain performance, progress, or challenges. The purpose of the qualitative evaluation is not only to describe what is in place, but also to provide a coherent and evidence-based account of how the institution is addressing the standard in its own setting.

## 4.3. Assessment of Standards

The External Reviewers will evaluate the institution against each of the standards using the following criteria:

Table 2. Assessment Criteria

Assessment	Criteria
Unsatisfactory	The institution does not meet the standard. At least one aspect of the standard that is meaningful in the institution's case is not satisfied.
Satisfactory	The institution meets the standard on an acceptable level. If any aspect of the standard is not fulfilled on an acceptable level, this aspect is not meaningful in the institution's case.
Excellent	The institution systematically and substantially exceeds the standard. The institution provides an exceptional performance with regards to all aspects of the standard that are meaningful in the institution's case. Evidence (data, examples etc.) proving this exceptional performance exist and the institution can be regarded as an international good practice example with respect to this standard.

Evaluation against each standard is based on a European benchmark, reflecting what can be expected from comparable institutions within the European Higher Education Area.

In extraordinary cases, a standard might be evaluated as "N/A - Not considered applicable or relevant." Such a case, however, requires a review and written consent of the Certification Coordination Team.

## 5. SHIFT ESG Certification Process

This section describes the SHIFT ESG Certification process and its operational framework. The process has been designed to provide a transparent, coherent, and quality-assured approach to recognising HEIs that demonstrate commitment and measurable progress in ESG performance.

To facilitate effective participation, institutions and external reviewers are provided with guidance and supporting materials that explain the requirements, procedures, and expectations associated with each phase. This section explains in detail the four phases involved in the certification process, including concrete implementation steps, institutional responsibilities, documentation requirements, and decision and evaluation processes across the four certification phases.

### 5.1. Eligibility and Expert Committee

Before the formal certification process begins, applicant institutions complete an initial eligibility and set-up stage. This stage takes place prior to Phase 1 and is intended to confirm that the institution has the appropriate profile and minimum readiness to participate in the SHIFT ESG Certification process.

It includes the submission of the Eligibility Application, its review by the SHIFT Certification Coordination Team, formal confirmation of the institution's participation, and the appointment of the Expert Committee, who will support the subsequent external evaluation process. This step ensures that the certification process starts on a clear, consistent, and well-prepared basis.

#### Eligibility

Before starting the process, the interested institution completes and submits an "Eligibility Application" to the SHIFT Certification Coordination Team. Through the eligibility application, the Team will determine if the university has the profile needed for potentially achieving the certification. The Team reviews the institution's eligibility application and notifies the result of the eligibility review via email. In case of a negative decision, a ground for rejection is provided to the university. The university has the right to appeal the decision, following the policies.

#### Expert Committee Appointment

As soon as the certification procedure has started, the Certification Coordination Team will appoint an Expert Committee for the procedure. Each participating institution is

assigned two (2) independent external reviewers with a background and expertise in sustainability, ESG governance, higher education management, or quality assurance.

The applicant institution will be informed via email about the appointed experts. The applicant institution has the right to challenge any committee member within 14 days by pointing out actual or potential conflicts of interest, according to the policies.

## 5.2. SHIFT ESG Certification Phases

The SHIFT ESG Certification is a four-phase process integrating digital self-assessment, qualitative institutional self-reporting, independent external evaluation, and certification decision procedures into a coherent and transparent framework, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. SHIFT ESG Certification Process



HEIs undergoing the certification process move to the next phase once all mandatory outputs of the preceding phase have been completed. By combining self-assessment and external evaluation, the certification process seeks to enhance transparency, foster continuous development, and strengthen institutional accountability in ESG-related areas.

### 5.2.1. Phase 1: Platform Self-Assessment Phase

For the first phase of self-assessment, HEIs undertake the questionnaire in the ESG Impact Index Open-Access Platform to identify their performance status in relation to the ESG dimensions. This phase establishes a baseline ESG performance profile for participating universities.

The designated representatives of participating HEIs register on the platform and complete the self-assessment questionnaire directly through the online interface, accessible at: <https://shift-esg.eu/tools-platform-assessment.php?lang=en>

Figure 2. Registration page of the ESG Impact Index Open-Access Platform



During the self-assessment phase, participating HEIs complete a sequential self-assessment via the ESG Impact Index Platform. Their responses are processed automatically by the platform to generate institutional performance report, including scores, ESG maturity profiles, visualisations, and diagnostic summaries. These outputs provide a baseline assessment of institutional ESG performance. This baseline serves as the reference point for subsequent qualitative reporting, and external evaluation stages of the certification process. Upon completion of the self-assessment, institutions receive an automatically generated ESG Impact Index report.

### 5.2.2. Phase 2: Qualitative Institutional Assessment Phase

In the second phase of qualitative self-evaluation, HEIs reflect on their institutional landscape and submit a report on their current ESG practices in relation to the predefined and standardised ESG areas identified in the ESG Impact Index Matrix Open-Access Platform.

Phase 2 focuses on qualitative reporting of ESG in the institution. Building on the baseline insights of the Platform Self-Assessment in Phase 1, each HEI is required to prepare a Qualitative Institutional Assessment Report of max 30 pages. The report captures institutional context, the depth of implementation, and governance arrangements that often cannot be fully showcased through numerical indicators alone. Consequently, this phase plays an important role in validating the maturity and sustainability of ESG practices within participating institutions.

#### **Selection of ESG Areas**

To ensure balanced representation across ESG dimensions while respecting institutional priorities and strategic relevance, participating HEIs are required to select

ESG Areas for in-depth qualitative reporting. Specifically, institutions select two focus areas from each dimension (Environmental, Social, Governance), resulting in a total of six ESG Areas per institution.

The selection promotes breadth of institutional ESG coverage, enhance cross-institutional comparability, and ensure that certification assessments reflect performance across multiple domains.

For each selected ESG Area, participating institutions are required to report on institutional performance, based on the definition:

- Provide descriptive explanations and supporting evidence of how each area is being planned, implemented, and evaluated.
- Identify the institutional resources and internal structures.
- Specify the achievements and challenges.

Institutions are welcome to describe additional elements to suit their specific context.

### **Evidence-Based Reporting**

Any claims made in the self-evaluation report need to be supported by verifiable institutional evidence. Accepted evidences includes, but is not limited to, policy documents, strategic plans, monitoring reports, internal guidelines, weblinks, or publicly available sustainability disclosures or reports. Crucially, all evidences must be clearly referenced and available on request. The Expert Committee may ask for specific documents to enable effective verification, if deemed needed.

Prior to submission, participating HEIs should carry out their own internal quality checks to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the report. To ensure consistency and comparability across institutions, a template for Qualitative Institutional Self-Assessment is provided. Participating HEIs are required to use this template when preparing their self-evaluation report. The use of the template ensures methodological coherence across participating institutions and facilitates transparent external evaluation.

- [Annex: Template for Qualitative Institutional Assessment](#)

### **5.2.3. Phase 3: External Evaluation and Review Phase**

The third phase, consist of the evaluation by two external reviewers to verify the self-evaluation prepared by participating HEIs. In this phase, external reviewers assess the evidence provided (both from the Platform Self-Assessment Report and the Qualitative Institutional Assessment Report) and provide feedback that will inform the final certification decision.

This phase involves a 2 to 4 hour long online meeting with the applicant institution to review open questions and comments.

### **Reporting**

After the evaluation is completed, reviewers prepare a Final Report for each participating institution. The report sums up evaluation outcomes, highlighting institutional strengths, gaps in implementation, providing recommendations for improvement, and conditions to be developed (when needed).

Participating HEIs are expected to respond to the Final Report by submitting an Action Plan, following the provided template. The action plan sets out clear priorities, responsible person/unit, and a rough timeline for implementation of next steps. Submission of this action plan is a formal requirement before moving to the final certification decision.

### **Annex:**

- Guidance for Peer Review Online Meeting
- Template for Final Report
- Template for Action Plan

### **5.2.4. Phase 4: Certification Decision**

Phase 4 marks the final decision-making and recognition stage of the SHIFT ESG Certification. Evaluation results are consolidated, validated, and transformed into an official certification decision that reflects each institution's level of ESG integration, governance, alignment, and implementation capacity.

The Certification Decision is informed by the recommendation for each standard (satisfied, excellent or unsatisfied) by the Expert Committee in the Final Report (Phase 3). In Phase 4, the Certification Coordination Team will review the appropriateness of the submitted Action Plan by the applicant institution as a response to the Final Report (a formal requirement for certification), and if appropriate award the certification in line with the reviewer recommendation in the Final Report.

The certification serves as formal recognition of institutional ESG performance and may be used for sustainability reporting, institutional communication strategies, and stakeholder engagement activities. In doing so, the certification demonstrates contribution to ESG dimensions of higher education, strengthening institutional transparency, accountability, and credibility. Institutions that successfully complete

the process are granted the SHIFT ESG Certified University label for the duration of the certification period and may use this designation in accordance with the applicable communication and usage principles (in this document).

- Annex: Label of SHIFT Certification

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