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Ruben Topchyan is Director of the National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance (ANQA), Armenia, a position he has held since 2008. He has played a leading role in developing Armenia's national quality assurance system, promoting its alignment with European standards and guidelines while addressing national priorities and institutional contexts. His professional work focuses on institutional and programme accreditation, quality enhancement, OBTL, student-centred education, constructive alignment and the development of sustainable quality assurance mechanisms. Under his leadership, ANQA achieved membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and registration on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

He was elected to the Board of ENQA in 2019 and re-elected in 2022, serving two consecutive terms and contributing to the development of quality assurance policies and international cooperation within the European Higher Education Area.

Alongside his leadership in quality assurance, he has an extensive academic background in informatics and applied mathematics. Since 1987, he has served as an Associate Professor at Yerevan State University, where he has also held several academic and administrative leadership positions, including Executive Director of the Information Technologies Educational and Research Centre, Director of the Computer Centre and Chair of the Department of System Programming. He holds a PhD in Physics and Mathematics from Moscow State University and a Diploma with Honours in Applied Mathematics from Yerevan State University. His academic

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In October 2026, she was elected to the Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) for a three-year term. Since 2019, she has represented Armenia in the Bologna Follow-Up Group's Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance, serving as its Co-Chair since 2024. She has extensive experience in coordinating Erasmus+ projects focused on higher education reform, qualifications frameworks, internationalisation and quality assurance.

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Her professional activities include contributing to the evaluation of academic programmes from a quality assurance perspective and participating in the organisation and delivery of workshops aimed at strengthening outcomes-based education, constructive alignment and academic programme enhancement. These activities particularly focus on the formulation and alignment of learning outcomes, the coherence between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning methods, and assessment approaches, as well as the use of evaluation findings to inform programme improvement.

Her professional interests include academic programme evaluation, constructive alignment, outcomes-based education and evidence-based approaches to quality enhancement.

Paper

Where should change happen? Constructive alignment as a quality assurance tool for responding to employer and professional-sector feedback

Abstract

Higher education institutions are expected to respond to labour-market change and employer feedback, yet deciding where educational change is needed remains difficult. Concerns about graduate competence often prompt new learning outcomes, courses or programme redesign, even when a more focused response would address the underlying problem. This paper proposes an Alignment-Based Change Localisation Model, a decision protocol that links professionally grounded performance requirements to intended learning outcomes, assessment tasks, assessment criteria and evidence of student achievement. This model introduces red lines: professionally and academically validated essential performance requirements that anchor backward diagnosis through course dependencies. It is illustrated through two Armenian cases, drawing on stakeholder discussions and curriculum documents. The paper argues that programme improvement depends less on how much an institution changes than on whether it identifies the appropriate level of intervention.

Keywords: constructive alignment; red lines; change localisation; employer engagement; assessment; quality assurance

1. Introduction

Employer and professional-sector feedback is an important source of information for programme enhancement, but translating professional expectations into educational decisions is not straightforward. Employers typically describe difficulties encountered in practice. Universities must then determine whether these reflect gaps in intended graduate competencies, in learning opportunities or in assessment. The same concern may require different responses depending on its educational cause. Institutions reported difficulty in deciding where employer feedback should be reflected in their programmes. In practice, they most often responded by adding courses or revising programme learning outcomes, even when the concern lay elsewhere. The model presented here was developed in response to this pattern.

A graduate may struggle to justify an engineering solution even though a relevant learning outcome exists. One explanation is that assessment never required students to exercise professional judgement; another is that preceding courses offered too little practice. The first points to assessment revision, the second to changes in learning opportunities. Diagnosis should therefore precede restructuring.

1.1 Alignment, Mapping and Evidence of Achievement

Constructive alignment provides a foundation for examining relationships between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment (Biggs, 1996). Curriculum mapping helps identify where competencies are introduced, developed and assessed across courses (Smith & Chittams, 2024). One of recent research also demonstrates how constructive alignment can support the integration of employability-related competencies into curriculum design (Cheung et al., 2026).

However, specifying competencies in learning outcomes and mapping their development does not necessarily demonstrate their achievement. An outcome such as "interpret engineering calculations" may be linked to assignments that differ in the professional judgement they require. Authentic assessment emphasises the application of knowledge in meaningful contexts (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024), while rubrics make assessment criteria explicit (Dawson, 2017). Nevertheless, predefined criteria may not fully capture the complexity of student performance (Sadler, 2009). The alignment of assessment items with curriculum goals also requires examination (Khan et al., 2025).

These perspectives highlight the need to examine not only whether competencies are included in a programme but also how they are developed, assessed and demonstrated. Importantly, the absence of assessment evidence should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of student competence. This raises the central question of the paper: how can alignment evidence help institutions determine where educational change is needed and what level of intervention is justified?

1.2 Red lines

This paper uses the term red lines for observable essential performance requirements that have been justified on both professional and academic grounds. The idea is not new in assessment. It parallels the critical-error criteria and entrustment decisions used in competency-based professional education (ten Cate, 2005). The contribution here is not the threshold itself but its use as an anchor for diagnosis: a red line is the point from which programme teams trace backwards through assessment criteria, tasks and preceding courses to locate where a capability fails to be developed or evidenced.

Not every expectation warrants a red line. A red line is non-compensable only when the consequences of the omission justify that status and when the decision is compatible with assessment regulations. Other essential thresholds can inform ordinary rubric criteria.

1.3 Interpreting employer expectations

Employer expectations require critical interpretation. Technologies, organisational needs and priorities differ, and an individual employer's immediate preference cannot automatically determine learning outcomes. Programme teams must judge an expectation's relevance to the academic mission, qualification level, disciplinary foundations, longer-term adaptability, and any applicable safety or professional obligations. Not every concern warrants redesign.

1.4 Implications for quality assurance and research question

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area emphasise programme design, student-centred assessment, information management and periodic review (ESG, 2015, Standards 1.2, 1.3, 1.7 and 1.9). External quality assurance (EQA) can question how an institution interprets a concern and justifies its response. Internal quality assurance (IQA) structures, programme leaders and teachers retain responsibility for implementing and evaluating educational change.

The research question is: how can professionally grounded performance requirements and constructive alignment support decisions about where change is needed following employer or professional-sector feedback? Drawing on Armenian accreditation dialogue and curriculum documents, the paper proposes an Alignment-Based Change Localisation Model with four moves: validate requirements, examine alignment backwards, localise a proportionate intervention, and verify its effects.

2. Research design and methods

2.1 Design

The study adopts a qualitative multiple-case approach. The model was developed in response to a practical problem, applied in authentic institutional settings. The two cases therefore serve as instances of the model's application.

Conceptually, the study builds on the employer-engagement framework of Topchyan et al. (2017), which structured dialogue around professional products, product lifecycles, professional thinking and underpinning knowledge in order to translate employers' accounts of practice into educationally relevant competencies. The present study addresses the subsequent question: once professional expectations have been articulated, how can institutions determine whether educational change is warranted and at which level it should occur?

2.2 Case selection

Cases were selected purposively on the basis of contrast in the apparent location of the concern. In the first case, an engineering modelling course at the National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia (NUACA), the relevant competencies were already specified at course level. In the second, the Oriental Studies programme at Yerevan State University (YSU), the coherence of the graduate profile itself was in question. This contrast allows the model to be examined under two distinct diagnostic conditions.

2.3 Data sources

Two types of data were used. The first comprises records of structured discussions involving academic staff, professional-sector representatives (including employers) and quality assurance professionals: at NUACA, a faculty meeting in July 2026 and follow-up meetings in September; at YSU, a discussion in

June 2026. The second comprises curriculum documents: at NUACA, the 2024 and revised 2026–2027 course syllabi; at YSU, the programme specification and a working curriculum map.

2.4 Analysis

The analysis was guided by five questions: What concern was raised? Which competencies were already specified? What learning activities, tasks and criteria might demonstrate achievement? What change or further diagnosis was indicated, and was it proposed or documented? What evidence would be required to evaluate its effects?

2.5 Researcher positionality

The authors developed the model and facilitated and participated in the discussions at both institutions. These activities formed part of a research and development initiative.

3. The proposed model: red lines, backward diagnosis and change localisation

The Alignment-Based Change Localisation Model is a decision protocol for existing programmes. It uses alignment evidence to decide where, and whether, to intervene. It has five steps, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Alignment-Based Change Localisation Model

1. Interpret and mediate the concern. Programme teams judge the concern against academic purpose, qualification level, disciplinary foundations, professional obligations and the breadth of stakeholder evidence. Employers may describe workplace decisions and. Where useful, an intermediary with academic and professional knowledge can translate these accounts into educationally relevant capabilities, without treating any one employer's preference as authoritative.
2. Validate essential performance requirements. Teams specify observable requirements and, where justified, designate red lines through academic and professional discussion.
3. Trace backwards. Starting from graduate performance or a successor course's entry requirement, teams examine assessment criteria, tasks, predecessor learning outcomes and assessed student work.
4. Localise the response. Teams select a sufficient and proportionate intervention, or decide to collect further evidence or simply monitor.
5. Verify and revisit. Teams specify in advance what evidence will show whether the intervention worked. New evidence can reopen the diagnosis at any earlier step.

3.1 Two entry routes

The model can be entered in two ways. In the requirement-anchored route, a critical professional expectation can be stated precisely enough to become a red line, which then anchors backward tracing. In the profile-clarification route, the graduate profile itself is unclear, so no single requirement can yet anchor diagnosis; programme-level mapping must come first. Section 4 illustrates one case of each.

3.2 Backward tracing through course dependencies

The course-dependency scaffold is: successor entry requirement → predecessor learning outcome → assessment task → assessment criterion → evidence of student achievement. Successor-course teachers specify the readiness they require; predecessor teachers identify the outcomes, assignments and criteria meant to establish it; programme teams then examine assessed work. Comparing a predecessor's exit requirement with a successor's entry requirement shows whether a capability is progressively developed and assessed. Entry and exit red lines clarify expected progression but do not automatically become pass or fail gates.

This goes beyond formal mapping of course outcomes to programme outcomes, which cannot by itself demonstrate achievement. The analysis distinguishes four kinds of gap: absent outcomes, inadequate learning opportunities, weak tasks or criteria, and missing achievement evidence. Several may coexist.

3.3 Localising the response

The location of intervention depends on the evidence, not on the employer concern alone. If students demonstrate a competence but the criteria fail to recognise it, the criteria need revision. If students lack opportunities to develop it, teaching or course progression must change. When evidence is insufficient, it should be collected before change is prescribed. Interventions should be sufficient and proportionate, not invariably minimal. Table 1 summarises the decision logic.

Table 1. Diagnostic findings, possible responses, responsibility and verification evidence

Diagnostic finding	Potential response	Who decides	Evidence for verification
Required capability absent from graduate profile	Review programme outcomes and scope	Programme team with IQA; institutional approval	Approved profile, revised alignment, integrative performance
Capability stated but not taught or practised	Revise learning activities and progression	Programme team with course teachers	Task sequence, teaching records, student work
Task does not elicit the required judgement	Redesign assessment task	Course teacher; programme team review	Student artefacts, sampled performance
Task suitable but criteria omit an essential quality	Revise criteria and calibrate assessors	Course teacher with assessors	Rubric, marker calibration, criterion-level results
Achievement evidence missing or untrustworthy	Improve evidence and moderation; suspend judgement on learning deficit	Programme team with IQA	Representative artefacts, assessed criteria, reviewer agreement

Capability demonstrated to an acceptable standard	No change, or targeted monitoring	Programme team	Representative assessed work, trend evidence

4. Illustrative cases

The two cases illustrate the two entry routes: assessment-level revision reached through the requirement-anchored route, and programme-level diagnosis reached through the profile-clarification route.

4.1 Engineering modelling at NUACA: a requirement-anchored route to assessment revision

Concern. At the National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia (NUACA), a course using the GeoSlope and LIRA software already covered numerical modelling, calculation and interpretation in its 2024 syllabus. Academic and professional participants did not question whether the competence was in the curriculum. They questioned whether assessment made defensible modelling decisions visible. Many of the teachers involved also work as practising engineers or represent employers, which helped the group express essential requirements in concrete professional terms.

Diagnosis. Discussion examined the relationship between course learning outcomes, practical assignments and assessment criteria, with particular attention to distinguishing technically acceptable solutions from inadequate ones. This led to the formulation of red lines: requirements for which satisfactory performance elsewhere in an assignment cannot compensate. In geotechnical modelling, these concern the representation of essential ground conditions, appropriate modelling assumptions and the defensibility of technical interpretation. Participants also noted that where a later course assumes a modelling capability, assessment in preceding courses should provide evidence of it at the necessary level.

Location of change. Comparing the 2024 and 2026–2027 syllabi locate the principal documented revision in course-level assessment. The revised syllabus specifies four course learning outcomes, maps them to programme outcomes, and makes practical assessment arrangements and red lines explicit, including attention to significant soil layers and groundwater conditions in GeoSlope tasks. This is a documented change.

Reported effects on coordination. In follow-up meetings, teachers reported that the explicit red lines had improved communication between them and colleagues teaching related courses. The red lines gave them a shared reference point for what students must be able to do before progressing to later courses. This is the teachers' own account rather than evidence of improved student performance. It nevertheless suggests that red lines can support coordination across courses, on which the model's backward tracing depends.

What the evidence shows. The 2024 syllabus already articulated modelling competencies, while the 2026–2027 syllabus makes the critical features of acceptable performance explicit within assessment.

The case shows how a proportionate intervention can be located at assessment level without adding programme learning outcomes.

4.2 Oriental Studies at YSU: a profile-clarification route to programme-level diagnosis

Concern. At Yerevan State University's Faculty of Oriental Studies, a discussion brought together academic staff and representatives of the professional field. It asked whether the interdisciplinary graduate profile was coherent: was the intended graduate primarily a language specialist, or someone able to integrate language with historical, cultural, political and analytical understanding? The concern was not that broader competencies were absent, but how different courses contributed collectively to the intended profile.

Diagnosis. The programme specification already includes outcomes on translation, research, analysis, communication and critical interpretation. The task was therefore not to add outcomes but to examine how existing ones develop across the curriculum: where each is introduced, reinforced and expected at mastery level. Unlike the engineering case, this could not be addressed through a single assessment task.

Location of diagnosis. The appropriate first response was programme-level mapping and academic coordination, reflected in a working curriculum map connecting courses to programme outcomes and to levels of competence development. This is not evidence that redesign is needed. Whether course or assessment changes follow depends on what the mapping, and a subsequent review of assessed work, reveal.

Once the graduate profile is clarified, it may itself yield programme-level red lines, for example in the final examination or thesis, where students would have to demonstrate that language competence is integrated with contextual understanding. In this route, clarifying the profile is therefore a precondition for formulating red lines rather than a substitute for them.

What the evidence shows. The programme specification, discussion record and working map document an emerging process of analysing programme coherence.

4.3 Cross-case interpretation

The cases show that the model's first move depends on how clearly the critical expectation can be stated. Where it could be stated precisely, as in engineering modelling, red lines anchored diagnosis and the documented response was at assessment level. Where the graduate profile itself was unclear, as in Oriental Studies, programme-level clarification had to come first, and red lines could only be formulated afterwards, if at all. The comparison also shows that the level at which diagnosis occurs and the level at which intervention eventually lands need not be the same.

5. Discussion

5.1 Contribution

The paper contributes a quality assurance decision procedure for existing programmes: a structured way of determining where intervention is justified, on what evidence, and how its effects should be verified. It does not propose a new theory of constructive alignment but draws together constructive alignment, curriculum mapping and research on assessment design to address this practical question.

Building on Topchyan et al. (2017), the model moves from identifying professional expectations to diagnosing whether they reveal gaps in learning or assessment. Its distinctive elements are the use of red lines as diagnostic anchors rather than solely as assessment thresholds, backward tracing through course dependencies, and the distinction between requirement-anchored and profile-clarification routes. The engineering case also suggests a further function: red lines may provide teachers of related courses with a shared reference point, supporting coordination across the curriculum. Entry and exit requirements and mediated employer–academic dialogue is proposed as operational supports.

5.2 Implications for external and internal quality assurance

The model clarifies a division of labour between EQA and IQA. External reviewers can ask three questions without prescribing curriculum solutions:

1. What evidence establishes an educational gap, rather than an isolated stakeholder preference or incomplete documentation?
2. How has the institution distinguished weaknesses in intended outcomes, learning opportunities, assessment design and evidence of achievement?
3. Why is the chosen intervention proportionate, and how will its effects be verified?

Programme teams and IQA structures retain responsibility for selecting, implementing and evaluating changes. For agencies, the questions could be incorporated into review guidance for ESG 2015 Standards 1.2, 1.3 and 1.9.

5.4 Further research

The procedure may transfer across disciplines, although performance expectations and evidence requirements must be defined in context. Three questions would test it: whether independent programme teams reach consistent diagnoses from the same evidence; whether chosen interventions remain appropriate after implementation; and whether student achievement against red lines improves over successive cohorts.

6. Conclusion

Employer and professional-sector feedback is most useful when it prompts diagnosis before redesign. The Alignment-Based Change Localisation Model offers a structured way to do this: validate essential performance requirements, trace them backwards through assessment and course dependencies, locate a proportionate response, and verify its effects. The two Armenian cases show that the same kind of concern can lead to an assessment-level revision in one programme and to programme-level mapping in another. For quality assurance, the value of the model lies less in the changes it produces than in the reasoning it makes visible to programme teams and external reviewers alike.

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