ECONOSCITECH INTEGRATION

ISSUE 10 PART II

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC ELECTRONIC JOURNAL

TASHKENT STATE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS

American University of Technology
Powered by Arizona State University®

ISSN: 3060-5075



Acceptance of articles
PUBLISHED MONTHLY

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ISSN INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER DENMARK

CONTACT: +998 94 3540880 https://econoscitech-integration-journal.uz

2026



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In accordance with Resolution No. 384/6 dated April 10, 2026, issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Attestation Commission under the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, this journal is included in the list of recommended international scientific publications for publishing the primary research findings of doctoral dissertations in the field of Economic Sciences.

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Electronic publication. Issue 10. PART II
500 pages. Approved for publication in October 2026.

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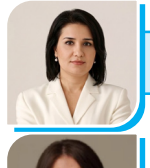
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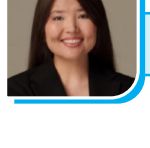
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Abstract: This study examines Germany's voluntary hotel classification system, coordinated by DEHOGA and the Hotelstars Union, and assesses its relevance to tourism service quality management in Uzbekistan.
Qualitative comparative, documentary, and institutional analyses are based on the Hotelstars Union criteria for 2025–2030, official German materials, international standards, and Uzbekistan's legislation.
Germany's system combines professional participation, harmonised criteria, independent on-site verification, three-year renewal, and market incentives. The catalogue of 239 criteria incorporates digital and sustainability-related requirements, although voluntary participation limits sector-wide coverage. Uzbekistan already provides for mandatory certification and voluntary classification, making selective institutional adaptation more appropriate than direct transplantation.
An integrated three-level governance model is proposed, comprising mandatory compliance assurance, voluntary harmonised classification, and continuous service performance monitoring, with clearly differentiated responsibilities for public authorities, professional associations, and independent assessors.
The proposed model can contribute to institutional coordination, the improvement of classification methodologies, independent assessment, and transparent digital quality monitoring.
Key words: tourism service quality management, hotel classification, professional self-regulation, DEHOGA, Hotelstars Union, Germany, Uzbekistan, standardization, quality assurance.

Аннотация: В исследовании рассматривается добровольная система классификации гостиниц Германии, координируемая DEHOGA и Hotelstars Union, а также оценивается её применимость к управлению качеством туристских услуг в Узбекистане.
Исследование основано на качественном сравнительном, документальном и институциональном анализе критериев Hotelstars Union на 2025–2030 годы, официальных материалов Германии, международных стандартов и законодательства Узбекистана.
Германская система объединяет участие профессионального сообщества, гармонизированные критерии, независимую проверку на местах, трёхлетний цикл подтверждения классификации и рыночные стимулы. Каталог, включающий 239 критериев, охватывает требования, связанные с цифровизацией и устойчивым развитием, при этом добровольный характер участия определяет особенности охвата гостиничного сектора. В Узбекистане уже предусмотрены обязательная сертификация и добровольная классификация, что делает выборочную институциональную адаптацию более целесообразной, чем прямое заимствование зарубежной модели.
Предлагается интегрированная трёхуровневая модель управления, включающая обеспечение соответствия обязательным требованиям, добровольную гармонизированную классификацию и непрерывный мониторинг качества предоставляемых услуг с чётким разграничением полномочий государственных органов, профессиональных ассоциаций и независимых экспертов.
Предложенная модель может способствовать совершенствованию институциональной координации, методологии классификации, независимой оценки и прозрачного цифрового мониторинга качества.

Ключевые слова: управление качеством туристских услуг, классификация гостиниц, профессиональное саморегулирование, DEHOGA, Hotelstars Union, Германия, Узбекистан, стандартизация, обеспечение качества.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism service quality is central to destination competitiveness and customer satisfaction. Because tourism products comprise interconnected and variable services, quality depends not only on physical infrastructure but also on institutional coordination, service processes, professional competence, and consumer feedback. Grönroos (1984) distinguishes technical outcomes from the functional quality of service delivery, while Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) emphasise consumer perceptions. Both approaches demonstrate why formal compliance and perceived service quality must be assessed separately.

These distinctions have institutional consequences. A hotel may satisfy prescribed infrastructure requirements while delivering inconsistent services, and a high level of guest satisfaction at a particular point in time does not establish that technical or safety standards are continuously met. A credible national quality system must therefore combine minimum requirements, periodic assessment, and operational feedback. Classification is valuable within this framework because it communicates a standardised category, but the category itself cannot capture every dimension of service delivery. The relevant research issue is how formal classification can be governed and integrated into broader quality management processes.

Hotel classification reduces information asymmetry by signalling expected facilities, comfort, and services. Its credibility, however, depends on the relevance of the criteria, the independence of assessments, and regular revision. Germany offers a useful example: DEHOGA has coordinated a nationwide voluntary hotel classification scheme since 1996, and Germany became a founding participant in the Hotelstars Union in 2009. This professionally coordinated system relies on harmonised requirements and external verification while operating alongside general public regulations concerning safety and consumer protection.

Uzbekistan already has a framework for mandatory certification of designated tourism services and voluntary classification of tourism facilities. Opportunities for further development therefore concern the coordination of these instruments with professional participation and continuous service quality evaluation rather than replacing the national framework with a foreign system. This study examines how German principles of professional self-regulation and harmonised classification can strengthen tourism service quality management in Uzbekistan. It analyses institutional mechanisms, compares the two national frameworks, and proposes an integrated governance model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundations of tourism service quality management have been developed through studies examining service delivery, consumer perceptions, information asymmetry, and institutional mechanisms for quality assurance. These approaches provide a basis for understanding the relationship between hotel classification, professional self-regulation, and continuous quality improvement. In the context of international tourism, particular attention is given to the role of standardised classification systems in establishing transparent service requirements, strengthening consumer confidence, and supporting the competitiveness of accommodation establishments.

Grönroos (1984) [6] introduced a service quality model distinguishing technical quality, which reflects what customers receive, from functional quality, which concerns how services are delivered. This distinction is particularly relevant to the hotel industry, where the availability of facilities and infrastructure does not necessarily guarantee consistent service performance. The model suggests that effective quality management should integrate measurable service characteristics with the processes influencing customer experiences. Consequently, hotel classification can provide an assessment of specified facilities and services, while broader quality management mechanisms are required to evaluate operational performance and customer satisfaction.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) [11] further developed the theoretical understanding of service quality through the SERVQUAL framework, which focuses on consumer perceptions of service performance. Their research highlights the importance of evaluating service quality from the customer's perspective rather than relying exclusively on formal standards and organisational assessments. Applied to hotel classification, this approach demonstrates that officially assigned categories and perceived service quality represent related but distinct dimensions. Therefore, classification procedures should be complemented by systematic customer feedback and continuous monitoring of service delivery.

The relationship between quality assurance and information asymmetry can also be examined through the signalling theory developed by Spence (1973) [12]. According to this theoretical perspective, credible signals help market participants evaluate characteristics that cannot be fully observed before a transaction. In the accommodation sector, verified hotel categories can communicate information about expected facilities, comfort, and service standards. However, the reliability of such signals depends on transparent criteria, independent assessment, and periodic verification. This theoretical approach provides a foundation for examining the role

of harmonised hotel classification in strengthening consumer confidence and supporting informed purchasing decisions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research applies a qualitative comparative design combining institutional, documentary, and systems analysis. Germany was selected for its voluntary, professionally coordinated classification scheme based on internationally harmonised criteria, while Uzbekistan is examined as the country of potential institutional adaptation. The evidence comprises DEHOGA and Hotelstars Union documentation, including the Classification Criteria 2025–2030; ISO 22483:2020 and ISO 9001:2026; Articles 15 and 21 of Uzbekistan's Law No. ZRU-549[1] "On Tourism"; and academic literature on service quality, signalling, and consumer evaluations. Publicly available documents were examined as of October 2026.

Five dimensions structure the comparison: regulatory status, institutional responsibility, standard-setting, assessment procedures, and quality monitoring. The analysis first identifies the mechanisms and limitations of the German system, then assesses their compatibility with Uzbekistan's existing arrangements, and finally develops a complementary governance model. This is a conceptual and normative study rather than an empirical evaluation of reform outcomes; no interviews, experiments, or enterprise-level financial data were collected. Accordingly, no causal claims are made regarding the economic benefits of classification.

For each comparative dimension, the analysis distinguishes documented institutional provisions from recommendations developed by the author. Particular attention is paid to whether a proposed mechanism could complement existing legal responsibilities without duplicating certification or classification functions. The assessment also distinguishes the credibility of category assignment from broader service outcomes: documentary evidence can describe procedures and governance structures but cannot establish their effects on hotel competitiveness or visitor satisfaction. This distinction defines the interpretative limits of the subsequent recommendations.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to a limited extent, accounting for approximately 10% of the overall research preparation process. Their use was primarily confined to language refinement, technical editing, and structural support. The selection of research methods, analysis and interpretation of findings, formulation of scientific conclusions, and overall scientific responsibility remained entirely with the author.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Institutional Characteristics of Germany's Voluntary Classification System. DEHOGA Deutsche Hotelklassifizierung provides a nationwide framework implemented through regional organisations, with common criteria and procedures coordinated at the national level. Professional hospitality bodies participate in maintaining assessment requirements, incorporating industry expertise into quality governance. Crucially, classification is not based solely on self-declaration: external on-site verification helps minimise potential conflicts of interest and supports consumer confidence.

Established in 2009 under the patronage of HOTREC, the Hotelstars Union harmonises evaluation principles across participating European countries while allowing limited national adjustments. The governance sequence is as follows: professional associations → harmonised criteria → independent assessment → official classification → consumer information → periodic renewal. Hotels choose whether to participate and may use their verified star ratings to differentiate themselves. However, voluntary participation means that the results do not represent all accommodation establishments and may be subject to selection effects.

This institutional design combines two different forms of coordination. At the national level, professional organisations organise classification practices and contribute sector-specific knowledge; at the European level, harmonised criteria improve the comparability of officially assigned categories. Neither level removes the general legal obligations applicable to hospitality businesses. This distinction is essential for interpreting professional self-regulation: industry involvement concerns a voluntary classification mechanism rather than a complete transfer of safety oversight or consumer protection responsibilities from the state. Independent assessors provide a procedural safeguard linking professional expertise to the credibility of publicly communicated hotel categories.

Harmonised Criteria and Periodic Verification. The Hotelstars Union catalogue for 2025–2030 comprises 239 criteria across seven areas: general hotel information, reception and services, rooms, food and beverages, meetings and events, leisure facilities, and quality and online activities. The system combines mandatory requirements for each category with a points threshold; additional points cannot compensate for an unmet mandatory criterion (Table 1).

1 https://lex.uz/docs/-4428097

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Table 1. Minimum Hotelstars Union classification requirements, 2025–2030

Hotel category	Minimum points	Mandatory criteria
One star	95	49
Two stars	180	52
Three stars	270	74
Four stars	410	91
Five stars	610	113

Source: Hotelstars Union, Classification Criteria 2025–2030, p. 21. Standard hotels; special provisions apply to hotel garni and Superior categories.

As Table 1 indicates, the points thresholds increase from 95 for one-star establishments to 610 for five-star hotels, while the number of mandatory criteria rises from 49 to 113. The combined structure offers a degree of flexibility: hotels may obtain additional points through different services and facilities, but they must first comply with the essential requirements of the desired category. This approach reconciles common consumer expectations with heterogeneous business models. Separate provisions for hotel garni and Superior categories further demonstrate that harmonisation need not imply uniformity across all types of hotels.

The revised catalogue reduced the number of criteria from 247 to 239, simplified requirements, and placed greater emphasis on core services, digital communication and booking, public transport information, sustainability measures, and carbon footprint assessment (Hotelstars Union, 2024a, 2024b). These additions do not mean that every classified hotel demonstrates identical digital or environmental performance, as some indicators are optional. The main managerial advantage lies in the periodic updating of expectations rather than treating classification as a fixed administrative exercise.

A hotel applies through the responsible regional organisation, completes a digital questionnaire, and undergoes an external on-site audit to verify compliance with mandatory requirements and assess points. German hotel classification remains valid for three years and requires renewed verification. Publicly available criteria, independent assessment, and a defined validity period strengthen credibility and support managerial planning. Nevertheless, personnel changes and service deficiencies may arise between audits. ISO 22483:2020 addresses hotel service provision, staffing, maintenance, cleanliness, safety, and guest satisfaction, while ISO 9001:2026 focuses on organisational processes and continual improvement. Thus, classification must complement rather than replace ongoing quality management.

The three-year validity period may create an incentive for hotels to maintain the required standards and enables hotels to identify investments or operational procedures that require attention before reassessment. However, even a properly conducted on-site inspection captures conditions at a particular point in time. Guest experiences may vary depending on staffing, management, maintenance, or fluctuations in demand. Accordingly, the classification system provides a verified baseline of service characteristics rather than evidence that every guest receives equivalent service quality throughout the validity period. This limitation highlights the need for separate mechanisms to identify recurring deficiencies and evaluate corrective actions.

Comparison with Uzbekistan's Institutional Framework. Under Article 15 of Uzbekistan's Law "On Tourism," the classification and assignment of categories to tourism facilities are voluntary. Article 21 provides for the mandatory certification of accommodation establishments, ski slopes, and beaches, subject to the statutory exception. These mechanisms serve different purposes: certification establishes compliance with mandatory requirements, whereas classification differentiates facilities by category. In both Germany and Uzbekistan, hotel star classification is voluntary; the principal differences concern governance arrangements, professional participation, and quality monitoring (Table 2).

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Table 2. Comparative characteristics of hotel quality assurance

Dimension	Germany	Uzbekistan
Classification and certification	Voluntary star classification; separate legal obligations	Voluntary classification (Art. 15); designated mandatory certification (Art. 21)
Institutional responsibility	Professionally coordinated through DEHOGA	Classification by an accredited organization attached to the authorized state body
Criteria and harmonization	Harmonized Hotelstars Union criteria	National classification and conformity-assessment framework
Verification and renewal	Independent on-site audits; three-year validity	National accreditation and sectoral procedures
Industry participation	Central role in classification governance	Potential advisory and standards-development role
Coverage and monitoring	Opt-in coverage and market signaling	Distinct certification/classification coverage; monitoring can be integrated

Source: Compiled by the author from DEHOGA, Hotelstars Union, and Articles 15 and 21 of the Law of Uzbekistan "On Tourism"

Because Uzbekistan already regulates both procedures, establishing a parallel star-classification scheme could lead to the duplication of existing functions. A more appropriate approach is to involve professional associations in developing and periodically revising criteria, training enterprises, and providing methodological guidance while maintaining independent verification. Any transfer of official category-assignment powers to additional bodies would require a separate legal review of Article 15 and the relevant implementing regulations. The German model therefore serves as an institutional reference rather than a directly transferable legal structure.

The comparative implications are organisational rather than merely terminological. In the German system, professional bodies play a central role in maintaining a common classification framework; in Uzbekistan, category assignment operates within an accredited structure linked to the authorised state body. The policy question is therefore how to expand the sector's contribution to methodological development while maintaining impartial assessment and clearly distinguishing voluntary classification from mandatory conformity requirements. International harmonisation is most beneficial when it improves the clarity, transparency, and consistency of existing procedures rather than introducing an additional layer of overlapping approvals.

An Integrated Quality Governance Model for Uzbekistan. The comparison supports a three-level model that distinguishes the functions of minimum conformity, quality differentiation, and service performance improvement. Level I maintains statutory certification, accreditation, inspections, and consumer protection. Level II strengthens voluntary harmonised classification through industry-informed criteria and independent category assessment. Level III integrates verified operational indicators and feedback mechanisms for continuous monitoring. None of these levels should duplicate or replace the functions of the others (Table 3).

Table 3. Proposed three-level tourism service quality governance model

Level	Main objective	Institutional mechanism	Managerial function
I. Mandatory compliance	Conformity and safety	Authorized institutions; accredited assessors	Consumer protection
II. Voluntary classification	Differentiate quality	Industry input into criteria; independent audits	Reliable quality signaling
III. Continuous monitoring	Track performance over time	Verified indicators and consumer feedback	Detect problems and improve services

Source: Developed by the author.

Clear separation of standard-setting, conformity assessment, and supervision is essential to prevent conflicts of interest. A multi-stakeholder methodological council could bring together competent public authorities, professional associations, accredited assessors, researchers, and consumer representatives to review international practices and recommend methodological revisions. Advisory functions could be developed within existing arrangements, whereas any extension of formal classification authority would require appropriate regulatory changes.

Within this model, responsibilities should be explicitly differentiated. Public authorities retain the power to define and enforce legally binding requirements; professional associations contribute operational expertise

and encourage voluntary improvement; and assessment organisations verify conformity and classification against transparent criteria. Monitoring bodies then compile performance evidence and identify systemic issues requiring intervention. This allocation would facilitate the integration of results from different instruments without implying that an assigned star category demonstrates compliance with all statutory requirements or that a valid certificate confirms sustained guest satisfaction.

Digital Integration and Quality Monitoring. Classification conveys a quality signal whose value depends on verification and accuracy (Spence, 1973). Uzbekistan could therefore link existing certification and classification registers to an integrated digital monitoring framework displaying distinct legal statuses, category information, assessment dates, and other publicly available indicators. Restricted-access data on nonconformities, complaints, corrective actions, accessibility, and compliance stability could support managerial decisions, subject to privacy and confidentiality requirements.

Official categories describe independently assessed facilities and services, while online reviews capture aspects of the guest experience. Combining these sources can improve quality information (Blomberg-Nygard, Anderson, & UNWTO, 2016), although reviews may be subject to selection bias, manipulation, and platform-specific methodologies. Verified operational data must therefore remain the evidential basis, with customer feedback serving as a complementary measure. The objective is to transform periodic classification into a continuous quality management process.

A practical monitoring system should distinguish publicly accessible information from internal supervisory records. Guests need accurate confirmation of a hotel's certification and classification status, while regulators and managers additionally require comparable trends in recurring nonconformities, completion of corrective actions, and complaint handling. The value of the digital framework depends on timely data verification, clearly defined responsibilities for updating records, and consistent indicator definitions. Without these safeguards, integrating multiple datasets could increase reporting requirements without necessarily improving the accuracy or usefulness of quality management decisions.

Potential and Limitations of Professional Self-Regulation. German practice demonstrates how industry expertise can improve the practical relevance of criteria and responsiveness to changes in technology, service delivery, and consumer expectations. However, professional self-regulation is not necessarily superior to public regulation. Where industry bodies both establish requirements and assess compliance without external accountability, potential conflicts of interest may affect public confidence. Independent verification, transparent decision-making, and public oversight remain necessary, particularly where Uzbekistan's certification system fulfils statutory functions.

Voluntary Participation and National Adaptability. Voluntary classification creates incentives for quality improvement and market differentiation but does not provide universal coverage. Larger or internationally oriented hotels may be more likely to participate, while smaller establishments may face relatively higher costs. Consequently, any performance differences between classified and unclassified hotels may reflect selection effects rather than a causal effect of classification. In Uzbekistan, conventional hotel standards should not automatically be applied to family guesthouses, hostels, boutique hotels, and other distinctive accommodation formats. Harmonisation should prioritise comparable assessment principles, transparency, essential service requirements, and reliable consumer information while allowing for nationally appropriate criteria.

Implementation and Future Evaluation. The central analytical distinction is between a classification category, assessed at a particular point in time, and the processes through which an enterprise maintains service quality. A phased reform could begin with a review of existing regulations, consultations with hospitality associations, and pilot testing of revised methodologies involving a limited group of establishments. The pilot should assess the consistency of external audits, costs, reporting completeness, and accessibility of information. Implementation indicators, such as participation and assessment completion, should be distinguished from outcomes such as guest satisfaction, complaint resolution, recurring nonconformities, and compliance stability.

Future longitudinal research could compare participating establishments with otherwise similar non-participants, accounting for size, location, category, managerial capacity, and voluntary selection. The present analysis does not establish that adopting German classification practices will independently increase hotel performance; rather, it identifies testable institutional mechanisms for strengthening quality governance.

Monitoring and evaluation should also account for the different objectives of the three levels. The effectiveness of mandatory compliance assurance should be assessed through adherence to applicable requirements and the resolution of nonconformities; voluntary classification through the consistency, transparency, and usefulness of category assessment; and continuous monitoring through its capacity to identify recurring issues and support corrective management. Keeping these evaluation questions separate would ensure that an increase in the number of issued certificates or assigned star ratings is not automatically interpreted as a direct improvement in the quality of services experienced by tourists.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Germany's voluntary hotel classification system integrates professional governance, internationally harmonised criteria, independent on-site assessment, periodic renewal, and market signalling. Its 2025–2030 catalogue illustrates how hotel star classification standards can respond to digitalisation, sustainability, and evolving guest expectations, while the voluntary nature of participation means that classification cannot serve as a comprehensive measure of sector-wide quality. The German experience demonstrates the importance of combining professional expertise with transparent assessment procedures and clearly defined institutional responsibilities. At the same time, classification should be regarded as an important component of a broader quality management system rather than a substitute for continuous service performance evaluation.

For Uzbekistan, the priority is not to introduce a second classification scheme but to improve coordination between existing mandatory certification, voluntary classification, and service performance monitoring. The study's principal scientific contribution is a three-level governance model that distinguishes public compliance assurance, professionally informed and independently verified quality differentiation, and continuous monitoring supported by reliable digital information. This approach provides a basis for strengthening institutional cooperation, improving the consistency of classification procedures, and integrating professional participation into quality management practices while maintaining the existing regulatory framework.

The effective implementation of the proposed model requires clearly defined institutional responsibilities, transparent assessment mechanisms, regular methodological updates, and adaptability to diverse accommodation formats. Particular attention should be given to strengthening cooperation between public authorities, professional associations, and independent assessment organisations, as well as developing digital monitoring tools that integrate verified operational indicators with consumer feedback. Such measures could contribute to greater transparency, more consistent service standards, and improved responsiveness to changing market expectations.

Further empirical research is necessary to evaluate the practical effectiveness of the proposed arrangements. In particular, pilot implementation and longitudinal assessment could help determine their influence on service quality, consumer satisfaction, compliance stability, and long-term competitiveness. The findings of this study therefore provide a conceptual and institutional foundation for the gradual improvement of tourism service quality management in Uzbekistan, taking into account national regulatory conditions and relevant international experience.

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Proofreader: Xondamir Ismoilov

Layout and Designer: Hasan Maqsudov

2026. № 10/2

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