**STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education - SQAA, for the 2017-2020 period\***

**\*Adopted at the 110th session of the SQAA council on 16 March 2017.**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education - SQAA (hereinafter: the Agency) is a public body established by the Republic of Slovenia for the assurance and improvement of quality in higher education and for development and advisory work in this field. The Agency assumed the tasks of the Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia and officially started operations on 5 March 2010.

In the initial period of operation, the Agency set its strategic goals until 2016. It strove primarily for the establishment of the entire system of quality assurance in higher education and higher vocational education in the Republic of Slovenia, for the monitoring of progress and strengthening of quality culture, for the integration of the Agency in international associations, and for the provision of high-quality counselling services by professionally qualified staff.

To this end, the Agency obtained ESF funds for the project "Establishment of a National Quality Assurance System in Higher Education 2010-2014", which was then extended until the end of 2015. All activities planned within the project were successfully completed. At the end of the project, in 2015, the Agency had to resolve a difficult situation in the field of finance and human resources. After lengthy discussions at the Ministry of Finance, project funds were replaced by integral funds from the national budget. In 2015, the Agency became a full member of the ENQA and thus achieved the second of the two principal strategic objectives set for the period 2011-2016. The first objective was achieved already in 2013, when the Agency was entered on the list (in the register) of trustworthy European agencies - EQAR. This also meant the fulfilment of both requirements defined in the Resolution on the National Higher Education Programme for 2011–2020 (ReNPVŠ11-20). An extremely active role of the Agency in the European Higher Education Area should be mentioned, too.

The present strategic documents determines the development of the Agency until 2020. The strategy is based on the premise that the Agency, with a partial reorganisation, can assume greater responsibility as a national agency for the assurance and improvement of quality in the Slovenian higher education area.

**Mission of the Agency**

The Agency provides for development and operation of the quality assurance system in the Slovenian higher education area. It operates with substantive and formal responsibility and provides counselling for all stakeholders and participants in tertiary education in accordance with the European and global development orientations.

**Vision of the Agency**

The Agency shall, with its system of quality assurance development, contribute to higher education in Slovenia being of high quality in terms of education and research, internationally recognisable, competitive and equally integrated in the global higher education area.

**Values of the Agency:**

independence,

responsibility,

openness and transparency,

professionalism and efficiency,

cooperation,

commitment to progress.

\*The terms used in the Strategy that are in male gender are used as neutral for both genders.

**FULFILMENT OF STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE PERIOD 2011 - 2016**

(the set of strategic objectives was adopted by the Agency Council in November 2011)

The process of fulfilment of strategic objectives is largely detailed in regular self-evaluation reports of the Agency and in regular annual work reports. They are summarised below.

**Achieved objective: Development and functioning of the quality assurance system**

In the initial period of operation, the Agency strove for the establishment of the entire system of quality assurance in higher education and higher vocational education in the Republic of Slovenia. To this end, the Agency obtained ESF funds for the project "Establishment of a National Quality Assurance System in Higher Education 2010-2014", which was then extended until the end of 2015. All activities planned within the project were successfully completed. At the end of the project, in 2015, the Agency had to resolve a difficult situation in the field of finance and human resources. After lengthy discussions a the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Slovenia, project funds were replaced by integral funds from the national budget. The full amount of the ESF funds spent was EUR 4,606,499.48, while the error established by the audit was EUR 140.63.

**Achieved objective: Monitoring of progress and strengthening of higher education quality culture**

The Agency continuously monitors the progress of quality - which is especially prominent in evaluations and accreditations of study programmes and higher education institutions. Each evaluation report on a study programme and on a higher education institution, namely, contains strengths and opportunities for improvement, which leads to the awareness and strengthening of higher education quality culture.

**Achieved objective: Positioning and recognition of the role, significance and quality of the Agency's operation in the public**

All evaluation reports on study programmes and higher education institutions are made public at the Agency website www.nakvis.si. Of course, reading these reports and taking opportunities for improvement improves the operation of other higher education institutions, too. The quality operation of the Agency also contributes to a higher quality of the higher education system as a whole.

The Agency is gaining international reputation, too: it is an active and equal member of ENQA and EQAR as well as three other international organisations: ECA (European Consortium of Accreditation in Higher Education), CEENQA (Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) and INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education). In 2015, the director was elected a vice-president of both ECA and CEENQA. In December 2014, the Agency as a partner signed an Erasmus+ project EIQAS (Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems) together with Polish agency PKA, Portuguese agency A3ES and Bulgarian agency NEAA. The project was successfully completed by dissemination conferences in Lisbon, Sofia, Ljubljana and Warsaw in February 2017.

**Achieved objective: Co-creation and development of higher education policy in the area of quality**

The Agency continuously co-creates and influences the development of higher education policy with its staff and broad experience. In this period, it devoted a lot of time and activities to the preparation of two unsuccessful proposals - draft amendments of the ZViS (Pikalo, Setnikar-Cankar). The ZViS-K was, however, successfully adopted by the National Assembly on 17 November 2016; it entered into force on 15 December 2016. The Agency's contribution in the preparation of these amendments to the ZViS was significant, too. The essential elements introduced by the Act are the following: predictability and stability of higher education funding; increased flexibility of study programmes; ensuring a greater level of autonomy of higher education institutions; transition to institutional accreditation; promotion of quality of higher education institutions; monitoring of employability of graduates and greater rights of students.

**Achieved objective: Promotion of the quality of transnational education**

The objective was achieved by the inclusion of transnational education in the Evaluation and Accreditation Criteria and by a detailed explanation in the instructions for experts. Of course, this objective is now a part of the strategy of internationalisation in the higher education in Slovenia.

**Achieved objective: Integration of the Agency in international associations (ENQA and EQAR)**

On the basis of the self-evaluation report for 2013 and the description of the operation of the Agency until October 2014, a group of international evaluators made a favourable report and the Agency became a full member of ENQA for the period of five years on 6 March 2015. By acquiring a full membership in ENQA, the Agency also achieved a strategic objective for the period 2011-2016. The first objective was achieved already in 2013, when the Agency was entered on the list (in the register) of trustworthy European agencies - EQAR. This also constituted the fulfilment of both requirements defined in the Resolution on the National Higher Education Programme for 2011-2020 (ReNPVŠ11-20). This was also one of the six measures implemented until 2015 (out of 46 measures) listed in ReNPVŠ11-20.

**Achieved objective: Provision of high-quality consulting services of the Agency by its professionally qualified staff.**

The e-mail address of the Agency - info@nakvis.si - is opened for all stakeholders. All stakeholders may send to the Agency written questions related to the quality in the Slovenian higher education system, to which they shall receive responses within a statutory deadline.

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE PERIOD 2017-2020**

(The set of strategic objectives - long-term and short-term - was adopted by the Agency Council at its 107th session on 15 December 2016; the objectives are arranged in chronological order.)

— Improvement of the professional work of the Agency.

— Strengthening of the independence and authority of the Agency.

— Strengthening of the culture of quality.

— Update of the criteria and other acts of the Agency.

— Establishment of an efficient and user-friendly information system of the Agency.

— Extension of the membership in ENQA and EQAR and strengthening of the international cooperation of the Agency.

— Reorganisation of the Agency work.

— Development work.

**ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY UNTIL 2020**

In the short four-year period until 2020, the Agency will organise its activities so as to achieve the strategic objectives set. The term Agency in this text implies especially Agency Council members, members of the appeal committee, full-time Agency staff and director and indirectly also Agency experts.

**IMPROVEMENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL WORK OF THE AGENCY.**

An integral and essential part of the Agency is independent experts together with student experts. Upon the adoption of the ZViS-K, the focus of the Agency's work shifted towards institutional assessment of higher education institutions. This is also a trend appearing in Europe (the Netherlands, Flanders, Switzerland, Germany ...). This requires a fundamental change of the programme and implementation of the training programme for experts. The Agency staff is thus obliged to include the counselling to higher education institutions in their activities. Although the fundamental responsibility for quality or quality assurance lies with higher education institutions themselves, they need a certain assistance in the establishment of an internal quality system. The Agency shall ensure further training of experts, further training of its staff and valuable exchange of opinions among related European agencies for quality assurance.

***Deadline: long-term activity***

***Carried out by: Agency staff, invited foreign guests***

**STRENGTHENING OF THE INDEPENDENCE AND AUTHORITY OF THE AGENCY.**

The ESG standard 3.3 provides that agencies shall act in an independent and autonomous manner - they shall be fully liable for their decisions that shall not be influenced by anyone. The independence of an agency shall be evident from official documentation (e.g. government decisions, legislative acts or articles of association of an institution) that determines the independence of work of an agency towards third parties such as higher education institutions, governments or other stakeholder organisations. The Agency will continue its endeavours to strengthen and maintain its independence. The Agency will have to provide a separate response to the recommendation about the structure of the Agency Council made by the ENQA executive committee. The committee wrote, namely, that the Agency should strive for an even greater formal independence of the government or ministry because the Agency Council includes two government members.

Strengthening of the independence and authority of the Agency would be best demonstrated by an introduction of a separate act on evaluations and accreditations (= Agency act). The Agency is, namely, a non-governmental budget user and belongs to the group of state institutions such as: National Electoral Commission, Human Rights Ombudsman, Information Commissioner, Constitutional Court, Court of Audit, National Review Commission, Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Their operation is regulated by **individual separate acts;** only the operation of the Agency is determined by the sector-specific Higher Education Act (ZViS-K) and the decision of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia establishing the National Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The operation of the Agency is also regulated by a series of implementing regulations. The essential implementing regulation of the Agency is the Criteria for the Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes. The Criteria have been adopted in agreement with all stakeholders in higher education, so they detail the evaluation and accreditation procedures. This legal interdependence is, of course, the basis of appeals in most cases when an accreditation is rejected or granted for a shorter period. The Administrative Court is mostly of opinion that the Criteria, as an implementing regulation, should not be stricter, or that they should have an appropriate legal basis in the ZViS (Paragraphs 3 and 4 of Article 153 of the Constitution of Slovenia).

The proposed **autonomous act on the Agency should be based on the ZViS and consist of Articles 51 to 51ž of the present ZViS, the present decision on the establishment of the Agency, Criteria for the Evaluation and Accreditation containing the description of all required procedures, and Article 9 of the ZUJF.** The omission of articles concerning the Agency would also make the ZViS more transparent and especially shorter. Since the procedures would be detailed in the act about the Agency, a strict application of the General Administrative Procedure Act would not be necessary, either.

***Deadline: long-term objective***

***Carried out by: Agency staff, Agency Council members***

**STRENGTHENING OF THE CULTURE OF QUALITY.**

'Culture' (from Latin term *cultura* derived from *colere*, which means 'to foster') refers to the forms of human activity and structures that give such activity meaning. Different definitions of 'culture' reflect different bases for the understanding or criteria for the evaluation of human activity. 6

The term 'quality culture', adopted from the business world, requires that all stakeholders in an activity must strive for its improvement. Stakeholders must make honest and open agreements, for this is the only way to ensure their optimal quality of their work. All information about an activity should be simply accessible. Thus strategic objectives can be achieved or a mission of an institution can be pursued. To this end, appropriate processes leading to the improvement should be established. We cannot, however, predict with certainty that such activity will be successful. Therefore we always need a self-evaluation and a search for 'good practices' in similar activities. We must be also properly prepared for the problems that may appear.

Upon the adoption of the amended ZViS-K, further strengthening of quality culture is highly desirable. It will be particularly necessary to develop systems of internal quality assurance in institutions, promote international cooperation and exchange of good practices, and, of course, implement the ESG 2015 - i.e. the primary responsibility for quality must be built in higher education institutions that are assisted by quality assurance agencies.

***Deadline: long-term objective***

***Carried out by: Agency staff, Agency Council members in cooperation with stakeholders***

**UPDATE OF THE CRITERIA AND OTHER ACTS OF THE AGENCY.**

The transitional and final provisions of the amended Higher Education Act - ZViS-K, which was adopted on 17 November 2016 and entered into force on 15 December 2016, obliged the Agency to harmonise the criteria for the accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes with the Act within three months of the entry into force of the Act. This process is particularly demanding because the Agency shall be obliged to consider reasoned opinions of other higher education stakeholders, too. In addition, the adoption of the amendment influences the changes in the quality manual of the Agency, protocol of visits to institutions, production of self-evaluation report; it requires a thorough reorganisation of the Agency websites and an implementation of a new obligation - i.e. keeping the register of higher education institutions and accredited study programmes. It must also harmonise the criteria for the accreditation of study programmes for teacher training, criteria for the transition between study programmes and criteria for the credit evaluation of study programmes according to ECTS. At the same time, the Agency must develop a new procedure of evaluation of a sample of study programmes and define the notification of study programmes. The training of experts-evaluators of the Agency will be carried out under a new programme, and the internal criteria for the classification in the register of experts will have to be harmonised, too.

On successful accreditations of higher education institutions, the Agency will confer a protected "logotype" of the Agency that a higher education institution may use on its documents.

***Deadline: short-term objective - criteria - 15 March 2017; the rest in 2017***

***Carried out by: working group of the Agency and Council; decisions adopted by the Agency Council***

**ESTABLISHMENT OF AN EFFICIENT AND USER-FRIENDLY INFORMATION SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY.**

The orientations of the European Standards and Guidelines for 2015 recommend agencies to collect information about study programmes and institutions. This information enables structured analyses of the higher education system and contribute to the improvement of systems and policy of quality at the institutional, national as well as international level. A thorough and careful analysis of these data leads to further development, indicates future trends and fields of good practice, or points out problems that occur continuously.

The Agency already gathers different data and keeps different records. Despite very short time-limits, the eNakvis project was completed and operates in the local server environment; it has not been uploaded to the so-called production environment at the Ministry of Public Administration - MPA, so it is not accessible to the public yet. The amended ZViS-K stipulates a thorough update of criteria and application forms (deadline: March 2017). Since new forms will be subject to comments, the system must be first installed in the so-called school environment on servers (MPA); it will be installed in the production environment only after the final versions of forms are available. eNakvis will then be available to all users. Since the Agency is hosted by the MPA servers, security requirements and protocols for the installation of the system are extremely demanding and slow; the same applies for all upgrades and updates. We should also point out the fact that the Agency will use the identic database as eVŠ, which means that it will not be able to switch off or stop the whole system for any maintenance works at any given moment. The amended ZViS-K also stipulates the keeping of records similar to the former register.

***Deadline: short-term objective - end of 2017***

***Carried out by: Agency working group; cooperation with the MESS and MPA***

**EXTENSION OF THE MEMBERSHIP IN ENQA AND EQAR AND STRENGTHENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION OF THE AGENCY.**

The 5-year validity of the entry of the Agency in the register of trustworthy European agencies for quality assurance (EQAR) will expire on 31 July 2018, while it will have to renew a full membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) by 6 March 2020. Both procedures will have to be carried out in due time to comply with the requirements from the ReNPVŠ11-20 about the entry in the EQAR register (www.eqar.eu) and about the request for the membership in ENQA (www.enqa.eu).

Both procedures, however, will probably have to be joined into one and an early ENQA evaluation will have to be carried out first. The Agency shall continue its policy of internationalisation by active cooperation with other agencies, exchange of foreign experts, participation in projects, exchange of good practices ... The Agency is active in EQAR, ECA, CEENQA and INQAAHE, and a full member of ENQA.

***Deadline: EQAR - 31 July 2018; ENQA- 6 March 2020***

***Carried out by: Agency staff, Agency Council, Agency experts, other stakeholders***

**REORGANISATION OF THE AGENCY WORK.**

The operation of the Agency is currently organised in two departments: general affairs department and quality department. Their work and links with the Agency Council is managed and supervised by the Agency Director. Already in 2013, an initiative was made that a research and development department should be established at the Agency. The situation at the time - extensive work on external evaluations and accreditations of both study programmes and higher education institutions - did not allow it. The ZViS-K, adopted in December 2016, indicates a transition to institutional evaluation. We believe that this is the right moment to establish the department for the development and analytic work of the Agency. A large number of external evaluations of programmes and institutions was carried out in the period 2010-2016, and this extensive work should be examined, analysed and evaluated. There is also a need for active monitoring of developments in the European and global higher education area.

In this strategic period, the Agency will also need strengthened human resources - we need a professional for the preparation and translation of the Agency publications and an employee for information and communication support.

A similar opinion was expressed by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in the Post-Audit Report to the Court of Audit of 19 January 2017 - quote: "The Government also expressed its wish that the Agency broaden its activities, especially towards the establishment of the development and analytic department and the strengthening of counselling activity, which, however, brings financial obligations, too."

***Deadline: end of 2017***

***Carried out by: reassignment of Agency staff, new job classification.***

**DEVELOPMENT WORK.**

The work of the Agency for Quality Assurance shall be focused primarily on the counselling in the establishment of internal quality system. The development work will thus encompass the following: a) preparation of relevant manuals and printed materials necessary both for the Agency and for experts and higher education institutions after the recent amendment to the higher education legislation - ZViS-K; b) preparation of consulting instructions - lists and descriptions of good practice - for a successful implementation of internal quality assessment of an institution and study programmes, and relevant instructions for the preparation of self-evaluation reports; c) maintenance and continuous updating of different computer bases and public records that the Agency must have - after the recent legislative amendment, the Agency will keep the register of higher education institutions and accredited study programmes; d) training of a group of staff that will carry out the counselling activity in individual institutions.

***Deadline: in 2018***

***Carried out by: Agency staff***