

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education



n.a.k.v.i.s

Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije  
za kakovost v visokem šolstvu

s.q.a.a

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education

# ANNUAL REPORT NAKVIS 2021

## GUIDE TO EXTERNAL ASSESSMENTS

## GUIDELINES FOR A HYBRID APPROACH IN TERTIARY EDUCATION





Annual report NAKVIS 2021.

Guide to external assessments.

Guidelines for a hybrid approach in tertiary education.

- Published by:** Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
- Editors:** Tatjana Debevec, Tatjana Horvat
- Authors:** Tatjana Debevec, Filip Draženović, Nataša Kramar, mag. Jernej Širok, Maja Milas, Gregor Rebernik, Klemen Šubic
- Translated by:** Polona Glavan
- Design:** RB Grafika
- Print:** RB Grafika
- Circulation:** 100
- For NAKVIS:** dr. Franci Demšar  
Ljubljana 2022

*This publication is free of charge.*

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji  
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

378(497.4):005.336.3(082)

GUIDELINES for a hybrid approach in tertiary education : guide to external assessments : annual report NAKVIS 2021 / [authors Tatjana Debevec ... [et al.] ; editors Tatjana Debevec, Tatjana Horvat ; translated by Polona Glavan]. - Ljubljana : Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2022

ISBN 978-961-95538-3-1  
COBISS.SI-ID 123741187

# CONTENTS

<b>ABOUT THE AGENCY</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Maja Milas</i>	
<b>BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE AGENCY'S WORK IN 2021</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>Tatjana Debevec and mag. Jernej Širok</i>	
<b>GUIDE TO EXTERNAL ASSESSMENTS</b>	<b>19</b>
CREATION OF THE GUIDE	22
STRUCTURE OF THE GUIDE	23
ASSESSMENT BY TYPES OF ACCREDITATION AND EVALUATION	26
THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION	35
<i>Klemen Šubic, Nataša Kramar, Gregor Rebernik, Filip Draženović</i>	
<b>GUIDELINES FOR A HYBRID APPROACH IN TERTIARY EDUCATION</b>	<b>39</b>
INTRODUCTION	43
THE CONCEPT OF A HYBRID LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	44
DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF HYBRID HIGHER EDUCATION	45
GUIDELINES FOR A HYBRID APPROACH IN TERTIARY EDUCATION	47
1. APPROPRIATE USE OF ICT, ONLINE TOOLS AND SUPPORT	47
2. ADAPTED AND INNOVATIVE TEACHING APPROACHES IN HYBRID LEARNING	50
3. STUDENTS	52
4. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY	52
5. QUALITY ASSURANCE	54





# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CEENQA</b>	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution
<b>ENQA</b>	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<b>EQAR</b>	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
<b>ESG</b>	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
<b>MIZŠ</b>	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Republic of Slovenia
<b>NAKVIS or Agency</b>	Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
<b>ZViS</b>	Higher Education Act







**ABOUT THE AGENCY**



## **Mission**

The Agency provides for comparability and international recognition of Slovenian higher education area and strives for continuous improvement of its quality. It operates with substantive and formal responsibility, in an expert, professional and independent manner, and provides counselling for all stakeholders in tertiary education in accordance with the European and global development orientations.

## **Vision**

By activities in the implementation of processes in the field of assuring and improving quality in higher education, the Agency will change the national and international higher education area.

Since quality higher education is the foundation of every modern society, the signatories of the Bologna Declaration committed themselves in the 1990s to make their efforts to improve and ensure the quality of higher education institutions, higher vocational colleges and study programmes their ongoing task. We are talking about the European dimension of the quality assurance system in higher and higher vocational education, which means: self-evaluation and accreditation or external evaluation of higher education institutions, their study programmes and higher vocational colleges with a mandatory visit of a group of independent experts to assess compliance with the prescribed quality standards. External evaluations and accreditations are the responsibility of independent institutions (agencies).

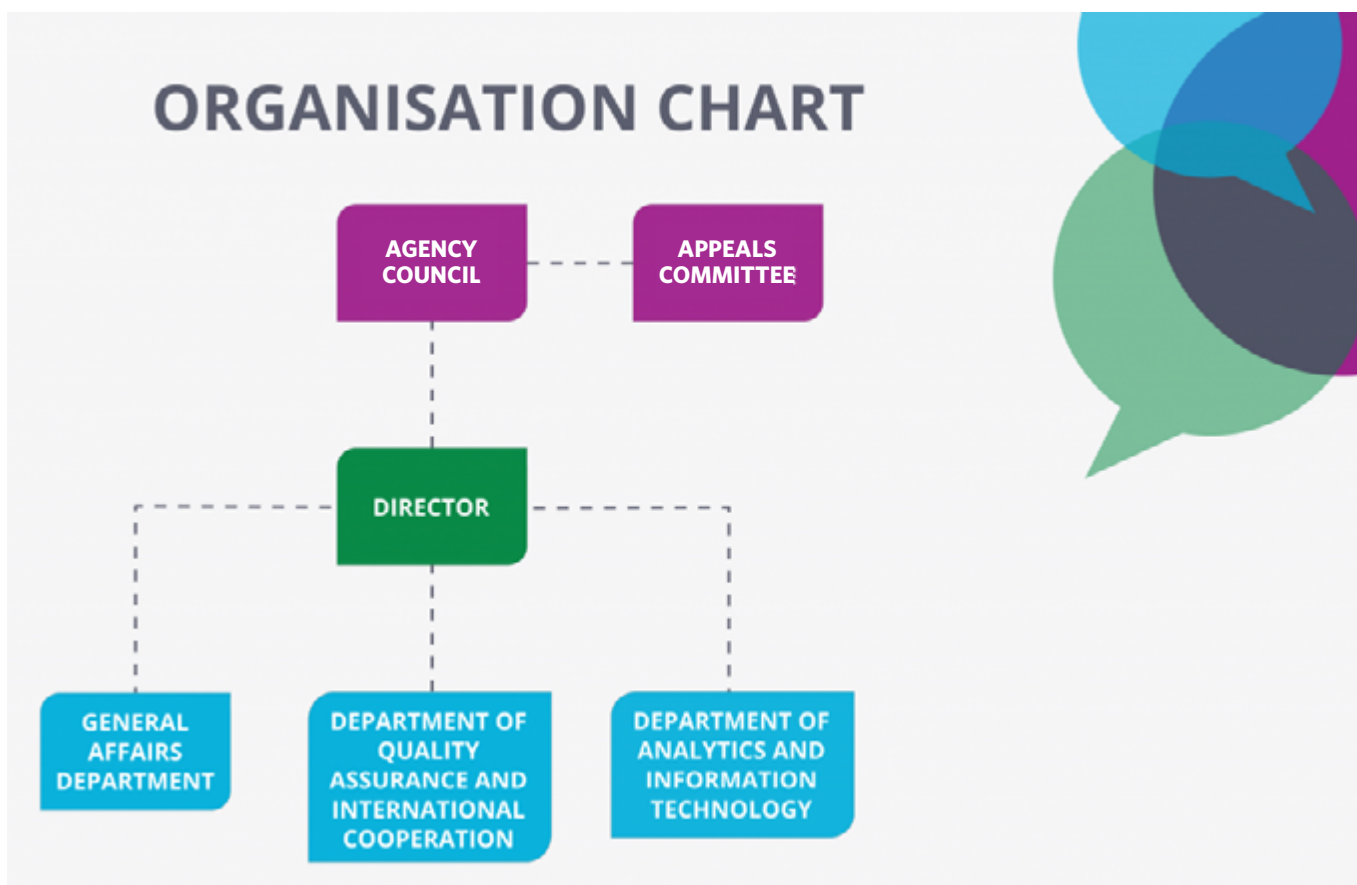
Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter: the Agency) started operating in 2010, when it assumed the tasks previously carried out by the Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Higher Education (hereinafter: the Council for Higher Education). Accreditations in higher and higher vocational education, of which an independent external quality assessment is a mandatory part, have been, namely, performed in Slovenia in one form or another since 1994.

The establishment of the Agency was a decisive step towards recognising and understanding the importance of independent quality assessment in higher and higher vocational education and deciding on accreditations and opinions on the achievement of quality standards. After a few years of good work, it has established itself well in the international arena and achieved full international recognition by being registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in 2013 and joining the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education – ENQA in 2015. External assessment of the quality of higher and higher vocational education has constantly evolved and partly changed, both in Slovenia and internationally. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area – ESG as well as the Higher Education Act have been amended; an especially important amendment to the latter is the ZViS-K adopted at the end of 2016, which increases the autonomy of higher education institutions in assessing the quality of study programmes, as it eliminates their reaccreditation, which was within the competence of the Agency. On the other hand, it emphasises the development and consulting work of the Agency, which is also made possible by the evaluations of samples of study programmes focused on such work.

From 2017 to 2021, the Agency focused on improving professional and development work, strengthening the culture of quality, its own independence and authority, renewal of regulations, computerisation and reorganisation. In cooperation with external stakeholders, it adopted new criteria and various regulations, taking into account both new laws and revised European standards. A thorough revision of the Accreditation Criteria in 2017 was followed by amendments in 2019, 2020 and 2021. During this period, the Agency also revised the Criteria for External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges, the Criteria for Agency Experts, the Criteria for Transferring Between Study Programmes and the Criteria for the Allocation of Credits to Study Programmes and Minimum Standards for Appointment to Titles.

It supported the changes to the regulations through training, consultations, interpretation of accreditation criteria and guidelines for assessment according to quality standards, revision of the Quality Manual, guidelines for distance evaluation and recommendations for work in emergency situations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Agency also established a good information system and reorganised its work.

In 2021, the Agency started implementing a new Development Strategy for the Period 2021-2025, which follows the key priority areas of the Agency, especially the desire to adopt an act on quality in higher and higher vocational education, improve assessments by quality standards and accreditation and evaluation procedures, carry out in-depth analytic work, establish of up-to-date databases on selected activity, comply with the guidelines of sustainable development, and engage in active international cooperation and proactive communication.



The **AGENCY'S DEPARTMENTS** perform all tasks in the basic areas of its operation, which means that they draft criteria and other regulations, conduct accreditation and evaluation procedures, update the Agency's information system, prepare analyses and guidelines to support the systems and quality assessment, engage in international networking, oversee the transparency of work and communication with stakeholders, and prepare materials for decision-making of the Agency Council and for the Appeals Committee. One of the basic activities is constant international cooperation with related agencies and associations of agencies, as well as development and consulting work.

In order to improve its work, the Agency has undergone several organisational transformations since 2018. In 2020 and 2021, its operations were divided into four departments: Quality Assurance; Analytics; International Cooperation and Information Technology; and General Affairs. As practice has shown that it would be sensible to reorganise the four departments into three in order to ensure better cohesion of content in individual fields of work, the Agency's operations, starting from 2022, consist of: the Quality Assurance and International Cooperation Department, the Analytics and Information Technology Department and the General Affairs Department. Each department has its own head.

The tasks carried out by individual departments are intertwined or closely linked.

As a result, they must often be performed by professional staff from various departments. The Agency's main activities, accreditation and evaluation procedures, are conducted by staff from both the Quality Assurance Department and the International Cooperation and the Analytics and Information Technology Department.

Detailed overview of tasks related to the external quality assessment of higher and higher vocational education by departments:

### **DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

- criteria and other provisions from the field of quality;
- accreditations and evaluations;
- modifications of study programmes;
- cooperation with stakeholders (institutions/colleges, experts);
- communications and public relations;
- international activities;
- organisation and cooperation in different national and international events (conferences, consultations, training courses, workshops);
- keeping and updating records (on accreditations, evaluations, modifications, VTI...);
- project-based collaborations and activities (micro-credentials, European universities, etc.);
- intersectoral cooperation (integrity, promotion of health, self-evaluation, etc.);
- archiving applications and other documents.

### **ANALYTICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY DEPARTMENT**

- plans and reports (annual work plan and report on the work and operation of the Agency, strategy);
- analyses, documents, publications;
- self-evaluation of the Agency;
- manuals, guides;
- organisation and cooperation in different events (conferences, consultations, training courses, workshops);
- translation;
- eNakvis information system and links with databases (SICRIS, IZUM, etc.);

- internal information system iNakvis;
- intersectoral cooperation (integrity, promotion of health, etc.);
- keeping and updating records (on accreditations, evaluations, modifications, VTI etc.);

## **GENERAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT**

- legislation, preparation of internal Agency acts;
- assistance in the implementation of activities from the field of quality assurance;
- work for the Appeal Committee;
- financial affairs (budget implementation);
- human resources affairs;
- access to public information;
- business and administrative tasks (contracts, receiving and sending mail, document records etc.);
- participation in external and internal supervision procedures;
- intersectoral cooperation (integrity, promotion of health, self-evaluation, etc.);
- keeping and updating human resource and other records within its powers.

The **AGENCY COUNCIL** is the highest decision-making body. Its composition enables decision-making independent of the politics and ensures the participation of all important stakeholders:

- 3 members are appointed by the Rectors' Conference,
- 1 member is appointed by the representative association of independent higher education institutions,
- 1 member is appointed by the representative association of higher vocational colleges,
- 2 members are appointed by the representative organisation of students in cooperation with student councils,
- 1 member is appointed by representative employers' associations by agreement,
- 1 member is appointed by representative trade unions in the field of higher education by agreement,
- 2 members are appointed by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia based on public invitation (1 is an expert in the field of higher education or its quality assurance + 1 is an expert in the field of higher education or its quality assurance who studies or works abroad).

The Agency Council:

- determines and adopts criteria for accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions, study programmes, higher vocational colleges and other regulations related to it; all are published on the Agency's website;
- decides on the following:
  - initial accreditation of higher education institutions and their reaccreditation, which may be granted for a maximum of 5 years,

- accreditation of study programmes, including international joint study programmes, for an indefinite period of time,
- accreditation of transformations of higher education institutions,
- compliance with conditions for the entry of transnational higher education in the public records,
- notifications of international study programmes accredited abroad;
- adopts opinions about compliance with quality standards of higher vocational colleges;
- issues recommendations to higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges to improve the quality of all their activities, and especially self-evaluation, updating and implementation of study programmes.

Decisions in accreditation and evaluation procedures – on granting accreditation or rejecting an application for it, reaccreditation or possible withdrawal – are decisively influenced by the compliance with quality standards by the areas of quality assessment determined by the criteria:

### **AREAS OF QUALITY ASSESSMENT ACCORDING TO THE TYPES OF ACCREDITATIONS OR EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS**

#### **INITIAL ACCREDITATION OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

1. Operation of the higher education institution
2. Human resources
3. Material conditions

#### **REACCREDITATION OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION AND EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF A HIGHER PROFESSIONAL COLLEGE**

1. Operation of the higher education institution or higher vocational college
2. Human resources
3. Students
4. Material conditions
5. Internal quality assurance and improvement, modification, updating and implementation of study programmes

#### **ACCREDITATION OF A STUDY PROGRAMME**

1. Structure and content of a study programme
2. Study programme implementation concept

#### **EVALUATION OF A STUDY PROGRAMME OR A SAMPLE OF STUDY PROGRAMME**

1. Internal quality assurance and improvement of the quality of a study programme
2. Modification and updating of a study programme
3. Study programme implementation

The Agency constantly strives to ensure and improve qualitative, professional and objective quality assessment in accreditation and evaluation procedures. To this end, it appoints independent groups of experts – which must include a foreign expert and a student – who carry out an in-depth assessment of compliance with quality standards in all areas of assessment. It regularly trains experts and candidates at special meetings and workshops, acquaints them with novelties in laws, Agency regulations and international standards for quality assessment, the need for impartial, in-depth substantive quality assessment, information on the characteristics of external assessments and satisfaction with them, the protocol of visits to institutions and colleges and the needs to meet other, equally important conditions for the Agency expert, such as the ability to work in a group and a respectful attitude towards interlocutors. The findings of the group of experts are evident from the accreditation and evaluation reports and are the basis for decisions on accreditations, external evaluations or important recommendations for quality improvement.

#### **Importance of cooperation**

In Slovenia, external assessment of the quality of higher and higher vocational education is inextricably linked to the active participation of students, teachers and researchers.

The Agency, as well as its predecessor, the Council for Higher Education, was one of the first in Europe and beyond to start working with students at all levels: students are compulsory members of the Agency Council and all groups of experts, and their organisations participate in drafting legislation, criteria and other regulations. External quality assessment primarily addresses them, as well as teachers and researchers. The task of the Agency is to contribute to quality education according to state-approved study programmes. The state-approved status or validity of diplomas is, namely, guaranteed by a granted accreditation, which is within the competence of the Agency.



# BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE AGENCY'S WORK IN 2021

The overview of the Agency's activities in 2021, a year that continued to be marked by the COVID-19 epidemic, shows that the Agency completed most of the tasks from the action or work plan. Compared to 2020, when COVID-19 significantly changed the working conditions and the Government suspended all accreditation and evaluation procedures, the Agency did not face any serious obstacles in carrying out its activities.

In 2021, the Agency started implementing a new Development Strategy for the Period 2021-2025, which follows the key priority areas of the Agency, especially the desire to adopt an act on quality in higher and higher vocational education, improve assessments by quality standards and accreditation and evaluation procedures, carry out in-depth analytic work, establish of up-to-date databases on selected activity, comply with the guidelines of sustainable development, and engage in active international cooperation and proactive communication.

In addition to accreditations and evaluations of higher education institutions, higher vocational colleges and study programmes, the main tasks of the Agency in 2021 were the following:

- preparation of substantive starting points for the adoption of the act on quality in higher and higher vocational education;
- adoption of the amended *Minimum Standards for Appointment to Titles of Higher Education Teachers, Researchers and Faculty Assistants at Higher Education Institutions*;
- implementation of the annual international conference and preparation of a publication with proceedings of discussions;
- preparation of a draft guide to external assessments – accreditations and evaluations of higher education institutions and study programmes with guidelines for assessment;
- training of Agency experts and organising consultation with experts and chairs of groups of experts on the guidelines in the guide;
- consultation with higher education and higher vocational education teachers on the guidelines in the guide;
- establishment of up-to-date databases on selected activities at higher education institutions;
- development of iNakvis and further development of eNakvis;
- relocation to new premises on Miklošičeva cesta in Ljubljana.

The tasks in the Agency's Annual Work Plan (AWP 2021) were defined by taking into account the following:

## **strategic objectives of the Agency** from 2021 to 2025:

- adoption of the act on quality in higher education;
- improvement of assessment according to quality standards and accreditation and evaluation procedures;
- in-depth substantive analytic work in selected areas;
- establishment of up-to-date databases on selected activities at higher education institutions;
- pursuing sustainable development goals;
- in-depth international cooperation;
- proactive communication;

## **areas of assessment** according to the Quality Manual:

- accreditations and external evaluations;
- internal quality assurance system of the Agency;

- external quality assurance system of the Agency;
- criteria and other provisions of the Agency;
- information system and provision of information;

#### **values of the Agency:**

- professionalism;
- transparency;
- development.

A brief overview of the Agency work in 2021 begins with the core activity, accreditations and evaluations, and goes on to present work in important areas:

### **Accreditations and evaluations in higher education and higher vocational education**

The Agency carried out its tasks in the field of accreditations and evaluations in accordance with the plan. It continued the organisation and implementation of distance site visits, which are carried out smoothly.

Compared to 2020, the number of positive decisions adopted by the Agency Council in accreditation and evaluation procedures was higher, namely:

#### Higher education

- accreditations of study programmes: 13 in 2020, 17 in 2021;
- initial accreditations of higher education institutions: 0 in 2020, 1 in 2021;
- reaccreditations of higher education institutions: 7 in 2020, 5 in 2021;
- transformations of higher education institutions: 2 in 2020, 9 in 2021;
- evaluations of samples of study programmes: 18 in 2020, 27 in 2021.

Total: 2020: 40 positive decisions, 2021: 59 positive decisions.

In 2021, 30 visits took place in procedures of reaccreditation of higher education institutions, transformations of higher education institutions, accreditation of study programmes and evaluation of samples of study programmes (37 in 2020). 5 visits took place at universities and lasted for a full week.

The Agency examined and recorded 612 modifications of study programmes (400 in 2020).

#### Higher vocational education

- site visits: 4 in 2020, 10 in 2021;
- opinions on the compliance with standards prescribed by the law: 8 in 2020, 3 in 2021;
- qualified opinions: 0 in 2020, 2 in 2021;
- opinions identifying major deficiencies or inconsistencies in compliance with the standards prescribed by law: 0 in 2020 and 1 in 2021.

A comparison between the two years shows that the total number of positive decisions in accreditation and evaluation procedures is higher in 2021. In 2020, the course of the procedures was marked by the declaration of the COVID-19 epidemic and a transitional period until the establishment of distance site visits. These procedures were mostly completed in 2021.

The Agency Council did not grant accreditation to one study programme and two higher education institutions (one case concerned transformation) because they did not comply with the conditions laid down by the ZViS and the quality standards according to the Accreditation Criteria.

The Council determined that the sample of study programmes for external evaluation in 2021 will contain programmes in the field of teacher training, and coordinated its decision with higher education institutions.

Table: Comparison of number of accredited study programmes between 2020 and 2021

<b>NUMBER OF ACCREDITED STUDY PROGRAMMES ACCORDING TO KLASIUS-P-16 - COMPARISON BETWEEN 2020 AND 2021</b>				
<b>Klasius-P-16</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of accredited programmes</b>	<b>Number of all accredited programmes in the year</b>	<b>Percentage of accredited programmes</b>
(01) Education	2020	2	13	15.4
(01) Education	2021	1	17	5.9
(02) Arts and humanities	2020	1	13	7.7
(02) Arts and humanities	2021	2	17	11.8
(03) Social sciences, journalism and information	2020	2	13	15.4
(03) Social sciences, journalism and information	2021	1	17	5.9
(04) Business, administration and law	2020	1	13	7.7
(04) Business, administration and law	2021	4	17	23.5
(05) Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	2020	2	13	15.4
(05) Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	2021	3	17	17.6
(06) Information and communication technologies (ICTs)	2020	2	13	15.4
(06) Information and communication technologies (ICTs)	2021	1	17	5.9
(07) Engineering, manufacturing and construction	2020	1	13	7.7
(07) Engineering, manufacturing and construction	2021	1	17	5.9
(08) Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	2020	0	13	0
(08) Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	2021	0	17	0

(09) Health and welfare	2020	3	13	23.1
(09) Health and welfare	2021	2	17	11.8
(10) Services	2020	0	13	0
(10) Services	2021	2	17	11.8

NOTE: KLASIUS-P-16 is the implementation of classification ISCED-F 2013 that replaced ISCED 1997 and entered into force by the amended Decree on the introduction and use of the education and training classification system (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia [Uradni list RS], No 8/17). Klasius-P-16 is intended for national and international statistical data collection and reporting.

## Legislation and other provisions from the field of quality

The Agency continued to draft substantive starting points for the Act on Quality in Higher and Higher Vocational Education, which it submitted to the Ministry of Education and Science in April. The act would replace the provisions of the memorandum of association, the chapter in the Higher Education Act (ZViS) regulating the work of the Agency, and include some of the content of the Agency Council's criteria. At the proposal of the Ministry of Education and Science, the Agency sent it a shortened version of the draft act in May. Among other things, it regulates accreditation and evaluation procedures, transposes quality standards from the Agency Council's criteria into legal provisions, amends the appeal procedure, introduces special sectoral committees to assist the Agency Council, allows for the meaningful application of the act governing the general administrative procedure instead of a complementary one, and expands the Agency's competences when operating abroad. In October, the Ministry of Education and Science appointed a working group to prepare a draft Act on Quality in Higher and Higher Vocational Education. The group met twice in 2021. The documents before the Agency (examination of and replies to comments, harmonisation of the text of the Act) were prepared intensively by the Agency. In December, it started drafting the explanatory memorandum to the articles of the Act, and the reduction of the legal material also made it necessary to revise the explanatory memorandum with the objectives and reasons for the adoption of the Act. It is expected to be submitted for procedure at the beginning of next year. Unfortunately, the abridged version of the Act does not regulate the unclear status of the Agency, which should also be properly regulated in the light of the Court of Auditors' warning.

*The Minimum Standards for Appointment to Titles of Higher Education Teachers, Researchers and Faculty Assistants at Higher Education Institutions* were amended as well. The adopted regulation refers to the provision of high-quality research standards for appointment to titles. The purpose is to ensure research standards that will contribute to improving the quality of research at higher education institutions in the Republic of Slovenia. In developing the amendments to the Minimum Standards, the Agency took into account global trends and developments in higher education and those in specific fields and disciplines. Some technical amendments have also been added. The proposed amendments to the regulation are focused on the following key areas: quality over quantity, taking into account differences between disciplines and fields, care for the Slovenian scientific language and the international recognition of Slovenian scientific journals, the quality and international visibility of research, and living abroad in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Act will enter into force on 1 January 2025, except for individual provisions that already apply to candidates who have applied or will apply for appointment to the title in 2021 and 2022.

## Analyses, documents, publications

At the beginning of the year, a report on the analysis of the employability of graduates of Slovenian higher education institutions, based on data from the Slovenian Employment Service, was prepared and discussed.

Particular attention was paid to the changing social and labour market situation, the perception of the employability of graduates from different disciplines, which is very much discussed in a simplistic way in the public sphere, and this analysis has shown that such assumptions are often wrong. The analysis also highlights long-term unemployment of graduates as a particular problem. The public release of the records is envisaged for 2022.

In the spring, a detailed substantive review of expert group reports on the quality standards to be met by universities and other higher education institutions for the reaccreditation was launched. The resulting in-depth analysis highlighted inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the assessments and was of valuable help in completing and improving the assessment guide. In the second half of the year, an analysis of evaluations of samples of study programmes with an international dimension was produced. The programmes are grouped into three thematic sets: international joint study programmes, study programmes in the framework of transnational higher education and those implemented by Slovenian higher education institutions in their branches abroad. An analysis of the expert reports on the evaluations of samples of study programmes by thematic set was published in early 2022. It is set out in more detail in the next chapter.

In autumn 2021, the Agency's annual publication was published, which – in addition to the Agency's annual activity report and a collection of discussions, mainly on quality assessment and work in epidemic situations – aimed to present the Agency's strategic development from 2021 to 2025 and guidelines for distance site visits. These were presented to the wider public in a joint CEENQA document. It is published in both the Slovenian and English language. The English version of the publication also includes a brief snapshot of the Agency's 10-year work.

The Agency has continuously ensured that the key documents and publications are accessible to the international public and that those of other actors in the European higher education area are accessible to the Slovenian public, by ensuring that the documents are translated into English and Slovenian respectively. Particular attention has been paid to the terminological consistency of terms in the field of quality assurance in higher education, which contributes to the standardisation of key concepts in this professional field in both languages.

The analysis of the scientific, research, professional and artistic work of the holders of courses in the study programmes being implemented continued. Useful databases on this have been created, which are compiled on an ongoing basis for each accreditation or evaluation process and shared with experts to help them in their professional assessment.

In the past year, the Agency continued its international analysis of the independence of agencies for quality assurance in higher education, which was extended with a substantial sample of agencies, including both ENQA and non-ENQA member agencies. The Agency analysed questionnaires from 27 different agencies and upgraded the methodology for determining the independence of agencies according to the independence indicators. The methodology provides a comparative overview of different aspects of the responsibilities of different stakeholders at different levels and, more broadly, an understanding of the roles of agencies in different national and European contexts. The Agency presented its analysis of independence and the different phases of analytical work both in several thematic meetings and through web content.

## **Manuals, guides**

In March 2021, the Agency published a draft of the introductory and main parts of the assessment guide and started collecting comments on it. The document discusses the structural features of external assessments and the discrepancies or deviations that occur in assessments. It contains legal guidelines and criteria for external assessments.

It details the specificities and important inadequacies of external assessments according to each quality standard and type of procedure, and provides guidelines for the assessment of scientific research, professional or artistic work, teaching, practical education, the content and delivery of studies, with specificities relating to higher education teaching, the levels and types of study, its disciplinary embeddedness and some institutional specificities, in the context of the different quality concepts, with a view to making the external assessments more in-depth, substantive, multifaceted and rigorous. The guide was updated throughout the year, taking into account comments from the Agency's professional associates, experts, higher education teachers, and new chapters were added on the assessment of higher vocational colleges and the roles of the different actors involved in the procedures.

A baseline for the assessment of second-cycle interdisciplinary study programmes was also developed, which specifies the field, scope and complexity of the courses, as well as the enrolment requirements. The starting points were presented to and adopted by the Agency's Council at its meeting in March 2021. The starting points for the assessment of interdisciplinary second cycle programmes are included in the chapters of the assessment guide.

A comprehensive database of higher education libraries has also been launched.

### **Organisation and participation in events**

Most of the events were related to the discussion of the draft guide after the assessments. Intense cooperation with representatives of higher education institutions and experts made it necessary to coordinate comments in formal meetings. The most important was held at the end of May 2021, where, after reviewing and assessing in particular the guidelines for the evaluation of scientific, research, artistic and teaching work, many solutions for improving the guide were agreed or coordinated.

The comments and agreements were taken into account in the guide. In parallel with the development of the chapter on the evaluation of higher vocational colleges, five training events were held specifically for their representatives: two in June, two in October and two at the end of November. In addition to presenting the external and internal features of assessments and the inconsistencies in determining whether colleges meet the quality standards for external evaluation, these training events also focused on the in-depth self-evaluation of their activities. In the spring of 2021, the training for candidates for the Agency's experts continued; it covered the criteria for accreditation and evaluation, the specificities of the assessments by type of accreditation and evaluation with the related quality standards and provisions for their assessment, and the criteria for the Agency's experts. The training is compulsory, followed by the practical training of candidates – participation in the procedure of accreditation or evaluation of a specific institution, college or study programme. In October 2022, the department, in cooperation with the Agency's International Cooperation and Information Technology Department, organised an international consultation on distance quality assurance.

### **International cooperation**

In October 2021, the Agency organised a thematic conference in the form of an online event entitled *Distance Quality Assurance*. The event took place in two parts. In the first part, six speakers presented their experiences with distance quality assessment and discussed the challenges, possible solutions and transferable practices in this context. The second part of the conference was devoted to a discussion, where participants could express their views and experiences and highlight certain dilemmas. More than 100 people attended the event. The event was accompanied by the publication of the proceedings of the meeting, which includes a presentation of the Agency's annual report on its work.

The Agency participated in a working group to develop guidelines for distance evaluations. The document was drafted under the guidance of a member of the board, and the Agency prepared a survey for the foreign agencies that are members of the CEENQA network, as well as draft guidelines,

which were updated on the basis of the results of the survey and coordinated within the network. The guidelines focus only on site visits as a common part of the quality assessment process of all agencies, so that they can be used by any quality assurance agency in higher education. The purpose of this document is to suggest possible solutions and offer advice where necessary.

Participation in the working group is also closely intertwined with regular participation in the CEENQA network. In 2021, CEENQA continued to hold regular agency working meetings to promote their networking, which was again marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Agency participated in a staff exchange with ARACIS, the Romanian quality assurance agency, in the framework of the CEENQA network. Three employees from the Romanian agency participated in a site visit to a university in Slovenia in the procedure of its reaccreditation, while three employees from the Slovenian agency monitored the evaluation of doctoral study programmes in Romania. The main purpose of such mobility is to exchange good practices and suggestions for improving work, while at the same time familiarising the employees with foreign quality assurance systems and their specificities. Another important aspect of mobility is strengthening international links and raising the profile of the European area.

The Agency has been actively involved in the ECA since 2009, when it was accepted as a member. Two employees currently cooperate with the ECA, one as a member of the ECA Council. Priority activities of the ECA focus on continuing education and training events on internationalisation and the European approach, organising webinars and debates, and providing support for the projects of the ECA's members.

At the beginning of June, the Agency also joined the ENQA working group for drafting guidelines on academic integrity for both higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. In particular, with the shift to emergency and hybrid education and the availability of various technological solutions, it sees an increase in the risks to ensuring academic integrity in Europe and beyond. Participation in the ENQA group provides opportunities to follow the latest good and bad practices and to solve challenges also in the Slovenian higher education area.

In 2021, in addition to its participation in the CEENQA network and ECA, the Agency continued to participate in the *Bologna Follow-Up Group* (BUFG).

The Agency continued to strengthen international contacts and organise both distance and live thematic meetings. 2021 ended by the visit of representatives of the federal quality assurance agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Agency for the Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance*, HEA), where possibilities for an even closer further cooperation were outlined.

### **Information system of the Agency (eNakvis and iNakvis)**

In 2021, a new change notification form for higher education institutions was made available in eNakvis. The form for the accreditation of study programmes, and international joint study programmes was updated. The redesign of the forms allowed the data structure of the form to be aligned with the data in the harmonised XML. The operation of all systems of the Ministry of Public Administration was synchronized with eNakvis.

In 2020, the Agency piloted the iNakvis internal IT system for Agency employees. In 2021, it became fully established as a necessary and useful tool for improving the management and control of activities, records, automating certain processes and facilitating communication between employees.

### **Communication**

Since the Agency's last external evaluation (in 2018), it has devoted a lot of time and attention to active, clear, accurate and timely communication, both with internal and external stakeholders.

To this end, the Agency uses its website as a key communication tool to inform the public. Accompanying tools are social networks (Twitter and YouTube) and electronic communication (e-newsletter). The Agency keeps up-to-date and communicates all events, news and important announcements and updates on its website and social media. This year, it continued its promotional activities and provided an additional 11 promotional films of higher education institutions, which are published on the NAKVIS YouTube channel and promoted on the website.

The Agency's main activity, associated with quality assurance and accreditation and evaluation procedures, continues to be the main line of development and operation of the entire Agency. More than half of the employees conduct accreditation and evaluation procedures. We should mention the evaluations of four universities, which, despite very complex and diversified procedures that, in addition to the Agency, domestic and foreign experts, involve many groups of different stakeholders at the university and outside it, have adapted to the new situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing distance evaluations. The Agency continuously obtained assessments from universities and other assessed higher education institutions or study programmes on the implementation of distance evaluations. We will continue to strengthen cooperation with higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges and other stakeholders, providing them with current, accurate and useful information about the Slovenian higher and higher vocational education.

*Maja Milas*









# **GUIDE TO EXTERNAL ASSESSMENTS**



In 2019, after slightly less than a decade of the Agency's work, whose basic tasks include accreditations and external evaluations of higher education institutions (institutions), higher education study programmes (study programmes) and higher vocational colleges (colleges), a guide to external assessments (guide) began to emerge. The Agency conceived it as a tool for assessments at a deeper, higher level of quality in terms of contents and expertise, and as a fundamental guide in the work of Agency experts and other participants in accreditation and evaluation procedures. We are pleased to note that the draft guide or so-called working version is already being well used in practice.

Before presenting the guide in more detail, let us briefly recall what happened before its creation began. Shortly after its establishment, in accordance with the legislation and criteria of the time, the Agency published a manual for experts, which addressed the role and tasks of the group of experts, applicants, Agency staff and external observers, detailed the procedures of accreditation and evaluation and reporting by groups of experts together with the first substantive challenges both in the areas of assessment and by types of assessment – the assessments of colleges, institutions and study programmes.

In cooperation with experts and other stakeholders, the Agency sought to raise the assessments to a higher level of quality, which first required a change in higher education legislation and criteria. Joint efforts were reflected in the amendment to the Higher Education Act at the end of 2016 (ZViS), which changed the process of accreditation and external evaluation of institutions and colleges, accreditation of study programmes and their modifications, extraordinary evaluations of institutions and study programmes and procedures for conducting such evaluations. Evaluations of samples of study programmes have been introduced, which are advisory in nature and are conducted annually. The conditions for the establishment of institutions have been changed and tightened (Article 14 of the ZViS) and the mandatory components of study programmes and the notification of study programmes accredited abroad have been supplemented. Here we should mention more detailed provisions on fulfilling the conditions for the establishment of various types of institutions (higher vocational colleges, faculties, academies, universities), such as employment of higher education teachers, scientific and research work in the field of study programmes and activities specific to each type of institution. Especially in evaluation procedures, the emphasis is on assessing the quality systems of institutions and colleges, self-evaluation, updating, modification and implementation of study programmes, or assessing according to European standards and guidelines for quality assurance – ESG.

While institutions are still granted initial accreditation and reaccreditation – the latter shall be granted at least every five years – this is granted indefinitely to study programmes, provided that the legal provisions and quality standards from the Criteria are met. What has been preserved is the instrument of extraordinary evaluation, which allows for the withdrawal of accreditation of study programmes. We are talking about the so-called **transition to institutional reaccreditation, which in practice means focusing on more in-depth, substantiated assessments of all activities of institutions and colleges, especially educational, scientific, professional, research or artistic.**

Following such changes to the ZViS, the Agency had to adopt new regulations. After several months of harmonisation with stakeholders, it adopted in 2017 and 2018 the new Criteria for the Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes (Accreditation Criteria) and the Criteria for the External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges (Evaluation Criteria). From determining the correctness of processes, informing, stakeholder participation in institutions and colleges, counting research, artistic and professional projects, etc. it has moved to a qualitative assessment with a greater focus on contents. The amended Criteria shifted the assessments from establishing compliance with the prescribed minimum of acceptability to assessing quality. An increasing number of provisions do not only require the suitability or existence of something, but also its quality. Assessments are now conducted at two levels. The first one determines the still acceptable fulfilment of the quality standard, i.e. compliance, existence or implementation of the prescribed. The second one qualitatively evaluates the established situation or phenomenon to the extent above (or below) acceptable, thus assessing quality. Attention is also focused on questions of what is very good, good, what is not good or what could be better.

The Criteria therefore constitute a shift from meeting the minimum standards for accreditation or reaccreditation or issuing a positive opinion on the evaluation of a college to a qualitative assessment of the quality of institutions, their study programmes, and colleges. Therefore they specify for the first time the quality standards that must be met in accreditation and evaluation procedures, provisions for their assessment, major deficiencies or inconsistencies that affect the reaccreditation, revocation of accreditation, reaccreditation for a period shorter than five years, as well as withdrawal of accreditation of study programmes, positive or negative opinion on colleges and follow-up procedures for institutions, colleges and study programmes. Quality standards or the assessment according to them differ even in the same areas of assessment depending on whether it is the initial accreditation or reaccreditation of an institution, or the accreditation or evaluation of a study programme. Compliance with the ESG can mostly be linked to quality standards by the areas of assessment for reaccreditation or evaluation.

The Accreditation and Evaluation Criteria are supplemented by the Criteria for International Cooperation, which regulate in one place accreditation of joint study programmes adopted and implemented by Slovenian and foreign institutions – the so-called international joint study programmes; notification of study programmes and higher transnational education. The Criteria governing international cooperation of Slovenian institutions in one place provide a better insight into the specifics of this cooperation.

## **CREATION OF THE GUIDE**

Although it may seem that the guide was created relatively late – four years after the entry into force of the Accreditation and Evaluation Criteria – this is not true. The Agency, namely, had to gain as much experience in working according to these Criteria as possible. It constantly monitored the work of experts and other participants in the procedures, educated staff and other stakeholders, and solved the problems that arose. It has already produced the second system-wide analysis of evaluation practices after a careful and in-depth analysis of both self-evaluation reports of institutions and colleges and accreditation and evaluation reports of groups of experts over a three-year period. This year it began the third system-wide analysis that will cover accreditation and (self) evaluation practices in a comparable period. The Agency also performs additional various analyses in individual areas, whose results are very important for the guide. One of these was the recent thematic analysis of the quality of international education based on evaluation of a sample. Important findings from this analysis are presented at the end of the chapter.

The findings of the analyses have shown the following:

- the assessment of compliance with quality standards still often lacks depth in terms of contents – especially the assessment of teaching, scientific, professional, research or artistic and study activities;
- the reports of experts are generally better than years ago, but there is an urgent need to improve them further, especially in identifying compliances or non-compliances; strengths, opportunities for improvement and major deficiencies or inconsistencies based on in-depth and professionally sound assessment;
- the assessment of certain quality standards raises questions that require more detailed guidelines for proper assessment.

The guide was conceived with a view to establishing a high level of assessments that are sensitive to the needs of students and the external environment, as well as soundly take into account the internal specifics of higher and higher vocational education related to different cycles and types of studies, disciplines in which study programmes are embedded, and institutional differences. These are important aspects of the assessed elements that bring quality closer to the inevitable characteristics of the field of higher education and compare it with academic standards as well as the characteristics of higher education. The guide touches on pitfalls and setbacks to which the Agency's policies so far may not have paid enough attention. Namely, we want to be even more attentive and more accurate in determining the actual state of affairs, and make the recommendations for improving quality better-grounded, more pervasive and more useful.

The first version of the guide, which, in addition to the characteristics of assessments, contained guidelines for proper assessment in accreditations and evaluations of study programmes and reaccreditations of institutions, was presented to the Agency experts, higher education teachers, higher vocational education lecturers and other representatives of institutions and colleges at several well-attended meetings in the autumn of 2020. It was well received, so the Agency supplemented it taking into account the comments and initiatives of stakeholders at the time and published it on its website at the beginning of 2021. It invited stakeholders to further cooperation, held several working meetings with them and continuously improved the guide, as well as wrote a new chapter on external evaluation of colleges and presented it in the spring and autumn of 2021 at special trainings of their representatives. At the end of 2021, it supplemented it with chapters on the reports of groups of experts and cooperation with experts and the roles of participants in procedures and published it on its website, and once again invited stakeholders to participate. In the first months of this year, the Agency is supplementing the guide with the last chapters: an additional chapter on the initial accreditation of an institution and special features in assessments of e.g. international study programmes (taking into account the results of the latest thematic analysis), etc. The guide will be presented to stakeholders again at the annual meetings in the autumn of 2022, when it will also be published in the printed form.

The guide is intended not only for the Agency experts or candidates for them (hereinafter: experts), but also for all participants in accreditation and evaluation procedures: institutions and colleges, Agency staff, Agency Council members and other external stakeholders. Its central and most important part intended for the assessment of compliance with quality standards will also be useful for institutions and colleges in self-evaluation and preparation for accreditation or external evaluation of the Agency.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE GUIDE**

The first, **introductory part** of the guide explains the need for it and the need for in-depth quality assessment in areas that have often been neglected, which was also influenced by the old legislation or criteria. It emphasises that in addition to assessing the organisation and management of institutions and colleges, providing information and including stakeholders it is important to make professional in-depth and responsible assessments of study contents, their embeddedness in the discipline, approaches to study, graduates' education or thorough and responsible assessment of research achievements. An excessive or even exclusive focus on stakeholder satisfaction, namely, often led to the neglect of explicitly professional issues that are at the core of institutions and colleges and relate to the complexity and depth of study, teaching, disciplinary embeddedness of study, its breadth or specialisation and quality regarding its cycle and type on the one hand, and on the other to the characteristics of professional and practically oriented higher vocational education studies.

The **second part** of the guide briefly presents the regulations that the Agency must comply with in its work; these are in particular sectoral legislation, Accreditation and Evaluation Criteria, and European standards and guidelines for quality assurance.

The **third, central** and very extensive **part** of the guide addresses accreditations and evaluations. In order to successfully introduce stakeholders to a different assessment, the characteristics of the assessments had to be discussed first; they are divided into external and internal characteristics. An in-depth insight into them was provided by analyses of reports from groups of experts and self-evaluation reports from institutions and colleges.

The **external characteristics of assessments** are characterised by the following: *frequency of assessments, level of criticism in assessments and their predisposition* by regulations. It was established that the frequency of assessments according to the quality standards set in the Accreditation and Evaluation Criteria is far from balanced, and that the level of criticism in the assessments is particularly problematic; the latter concerns how the actual state of affairs is assessed according to each quality standard: as a strength or as an opportunity for improvement or as a major deficiency or non-compliance; and the relationship between them.

Past assessments have largely maintained a relatively balanced level of criticism in assessments of the actual state of affairs, which is expected to have a positive effect on the commitment of institutions and colleges to further development and improvement. Loyalty to this principle resulted in several inauthentic assessments. It is emphasised that what is really important for an objective and fair assessment is an appropriate critical distance that will prevent it; that the stated strengths should clearly communicate that something is good, opportunities for improvement that something could be better, and major deficiencies or non-compliances that something is not good, so it urgently needs to be improved. The latter are defined in the Criteria and provide precisely defined procedures for further monitoring of institutions and colleges.

Strengths or opportunities for improvement should not be confused or equated with the fact that something is merely present or that something is absent, that an assessment cannot be without qualification, i.e. only a recommendation to change the assessed matter, and that assessments should avoid truisms, vagueness and insignificance. The same actual state of affairs should always be subject to a single assessment, as it happened that it was e.g. assessed as a strength and as an opportunity for improvement at the same time.

**Internal properties of assessments** are determined by different modalities of assessment. The guide *presents conceptual, cognitive and phase modalities*.

The conceptual modality is a possibility of using different concepts of quality in connecting the actual state of affairs with the prescribed one. Quality can be assessed in terms of the following:

- effectiveness of achieving compliance with set goals (e.g. strategic) or regulations;
- fitness for purpose, i.e. in terms of meeting the expectations and needs (satisfaction) of different stakeholder groups;
- economy-related needs;
- transformation that is centered on the student, focusing on their psychological transformation and connecting the quality of study with the improvement of the learning experience;
- process management, where the emphasis is on prescribing, planning, organising, managing and supervising processes at the institution and college and related rights and obligations of stakeholders;
- academic standards and values, where the principles of knowledge, profession and teaching are the guiding principle in the search for quality.

The latter concept is very important for improving assessments on the one hand and the quality of institutions and colleges on the other, but unfortunately it has often been neglected in the past.

The epistemic modality refers to the cognitive horizon of quality. Understanding of quality can be set in:

- the world of quantities and objective, measurable phenomena and characteristics (quality as a fact in the context of a regulation), when the finding and the assessment at least seem to focus on the material existence or characteristic of the actual state of affairs outside subjective perception, or
- the world of intangible evaluation (quality as the result of value judgment), where the finding and assessment are focused on qualitative characteristics of the assessed on the basis of well-founded and in-depth professional work.

In practice, cognitive frameworks of quality are not delineated but overlapping.

In the phase modality, the presentation of findings and assessments differs according to their orientation towards the so-called phase of the actual state of affairs. Findings and assessments can be made about:

- conditions that may lead to quality, but not necessarily do;
- processes that may also lead to quality but not necessarily do (these include the procedures and changes of the actual state of affairs);
- end states, i.e. achievements, recognitions, completed works, final assessments, results, etc., on the basis of which the quality can be assessed most objectively and professionally (that are an actual reflection of the achieved, realised, acquired, demonstrated or recognised quality).



After the presentation of the properties of assessments, it was necessary to address the so-called **shifts in assessment**, which occur when the properties of assessments or their characteristics are not properly taken into account – a conflict or imbalance between the prescribed, the perceived actual state of affairs and the idea of what is good, of high quality.

*Shifts in the frequency of considerations* occur when certain quality standards or provisions for their assessment are unjustifiably given more attention than others. The analysis of evaluation practices revealed that important areas of assessment were less frequently addressed; these were the following:

- research, professional or artistic and development work of an institution and college;
- work of higher education teachers, lecturers and other workers, persons responsible for activities referred to in the first indent;
- professional view of the quality of teaching;

i.e. the areas that require in-depth professional assessment and to which special attention is paid in the guidelines for the correct assessment of quality standards by types of accreditations and evaluations.

The assessments more often emphasised the satisfaction, cooperation, motivation, connection of stakeholders, especially students; and the process and administrative aspects of educational and development (professional) activities and the conditions for them.

*Shifts in the level of criticism in considerations* are also very common. They occur:

- when we establish the actual state of affairs, but do not follow it in our assessment or divert attention elsewhere (e.g. justifying the absence of professional or development achievements by teacher workload or administrative obligations);
- when a finding is labelled only as an opportunity for improvement, even though it is in fact a major deficiency or non-compliance;
- when something is labelled as a strength, even though written down as a critical remark or as a guidance for improvement;
- when something is labelled as a strength without containing any quality or without any justification and explanation.

*Shifts in the mode of presenting findings and assessments* have often proved problematic when analysing the reports of groups of experts and self-evaluation reports of institutions and colleges. They are based on how the findings and assessments are written – on the language and contents:

- *'pars pro toto'* shift occurs when a particularity or subordinate state or phenomenon is assessed and connected with a more general, broadly defined standard, or when a generally assessed or excessive actual state of affairs is attached to a specific standard;
- *shift to another or incompatible characteristic*, phenomenon or condition occurs when the balance between the prescribed and the actual state of affairs is broken (e.g. when the options for advanced pedagogical training of lecturers are described as the quality of teaching);
- *shift between quality and quantity* is based on the substitution or overlap of quality with quantity and vice versa. Quality too often becomes a sign of good or bad;
- *shift by exaggerating, inflating the appearance* means that a certain actual state of affairs is assessed as too critical or too positive. This includes avoiding the recording of findings and therefore making critical assessments. Some findings are excessively neutral although the actual state of affairs is problematic;
- *temporal shift* when the focus in assessment is shifted from the current actual state of affairs to that in the past or the future;
- *conceptual shift* is an erroneous or problematic use of the concept of quality, which influences the interpretation of a regulation and established actual state of affairs. This can result in erroneous or biased findings or assessments (e.g. replacing quality with stakeholder satisfaction – the latter can only be one of the concepts of quality);

- *phase shift* occurs when a finding and assessment are focused on a phase of the situation different from that laid down by a provision. It is particularly problematic when regulations require the assessments of final situations (e.g. assessing the situation for education and professional work by assessing the processes related to endeavours to achieve the situation and not – as would be correct – determining the adequacy of the situation itself).

Critical assessments are more often made in procedures (for example, in the field of operation of an institution, where its internal quality system needs to be assessed), and less often in end states. It is a tendency to resort to formalities, to organisational and administrative dilemmas where findings and assessments should be based on substantive and professional issues.

Finally, *shifts or divergences from the determination of considerations with regulations and from the frameworks of the procedure* or from the prescribed quality standards and criteria for their assessment are shown. They occur when, in the course of an assessment, the provisions of the regulation are circumvented either due to superficiality or intentionally. Analyses found that this was especially common in the assessment of professional, scientific, research or artistic activities. Although the Accreditation and Evaluation Criteria explicitly require the demonstration of quality professional or artistic activity, which makes mandatory the assessment of quality that must be based primarily on the final (demonstrated) state, especially accompanying conditions or processes such as the quality of plan of development of a professional activity or the appointment of a working group to prepare such a plan were assessed in the past.

The characteristics of judgments and the shifts that occur in the process are rounded off by the need to **prove and establish the findings and support them by arguments**. It is emphasised that evidence must be verifiable – it must allow for legal testing together with an expert finding. Therefore the use of evidence should:

- clarify the actual state of affairs established,
- clarify one's professional perception of truth and dimension of the actual state of affairs,
- connect one's findings with the appropriate quality standard and expand the clarification to well-founded statement on the compliance with this standard.

The question of the compliance of the established actual state of affairs with the prescribed one may refer only to facts and objective circumstances, but not to consciousness, ideas, promises, opinions or wishes, unless these are determined by the regulation.

## **ASSESSMENT BY TYPES OF ACCREDITATION AND EVALUATION**

Only after a thorough presentation of the characteristics of assessments and shifts detected in the analysis of expert reports and self-evaluation reports of institutions and colleges it was possible to accurately present the assessment of institutions, study programmes and colleges according to quality standards prescribed for each type of accreditation and evaluation. Each type is discussed in a special table, which first lists the applicable quality standards from the Accreditation and Evaluation Criteria that institutions or colleges must comply with, the criteria for assessing each standard separately, and then any specifics and respective warnings, errors identified in the analyses or inconsistencies in the assessment and guidelines for proper assessment.

Example of assessment according to the first standard for accreditation of a study programme in the field of structure and content of the study programme:

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF A STUDY PROGRAMME (Article 17 of the Criteria):

**Standard 1: THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF A STUDY PROGRAMME ARE SUCH AS TO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH COMPREHENSIVE KNOWLEDGE AND HELP THEM ACHIEVE THE OBJECTIVES SET AND THE PLANNED COMPETENCES OR LEARNING OUTCOMES.**

### **Criteria for assessing the standard:**

*a) consistency and cohesion of the content of individual courses and syllabi and the study programme as a whole*

*b) cohesion (compliance) of objectives, competences or learning outcomes determined in the syllabi with the objectives and competences of a study programme and its content regarding the type and cycle of study*

*(The following shall be assessed:*

- suitability (difficulty, relation between basic knowledge and specifics (specialised knowledge)) and the relevance of scientific, professional or artistic contents,*
- suitability of the content (difficulty, extent) and the relevance of study literature;*
- enabling the acquisition of suitable competences or learning outcomes,*
- enabling the acquisition of the appropriate professional or scientific title.*

*Recommendation: Part of the compulsory study literature should be in the Slovenian language.)*

*c) scientific, professional, research or artistic content integrated in the programme*

*d) order or distribution of courses by individual semesters and years (horizontal and vertical cohesion) and their credit assessment*

*(The assessment shall consider the extension, deepening and meaningful integration of the content of courses from year to year with consideration to electiveness; enabling efficient achievement and testing as well as assessing of knowledge, orientation towards intermediate and final objectives or competences or learning outcomes determined by the study programme and syllabi.*

*The suitability of the credit assessment of courses shall be determined according to the importance, difficulty and extent of the course (suitable balance of credit points)).*

**Clarifications:** The assessment of the standard and the study programme in general **is based on the characteristics or peculiarities of the type and cycle of the study programme.** It should be borne in mind that on this basis, the objectives, competencies or learning outcomes must be different from each other and must in themselves demonstrate the nature, level and complexity of the study.

An assessment should also take into account other Agency criteria (ECTS).

The assessment of this standard is related to the assessment of other quality standards; for example, it concerns a close substantive connection with the correspondence of the programme with the intended field or discipline.

### **Most frequent examples of inadequacy in assessment:**

- a standard is assessed only partially, in-depth substantive assessment is sometimes missing although the provisions for it are very clear;
- uncritical copying from the application without evaluating the statements in terms of contents;
- mere enumeration of the scientific-research, professional or artistic work of the course holders, without assessing in particular the provisions under the first indent of points a) and b); the research work of individual holders of study programme courses must be assessed according to Standard 4 in the field of "Concept of study programme implementation";
- lack of evaluation of contents integrated in the programme (point c), often only a mere enumeration; lack of an analytical view of what these contents mean for the whole programme taking into account its correspondence with the discipline;
- proposals for changing the syllabus (e.g. more elective courses, increasing the interdisciplinarity of studies...) without sound consideration and justification;
- proposals to increase the number of hours (CP) for practical training and closer links with the economy or employers without justification; lack of in-depth and weighty reflection, especially on the content, type, cycle, nature of the study programme and the competences or learning outcomes for which it educates;
- instead of the prescribed contents, the conditions for the implementation of studies (especially for students) are assessed, although they must be assessed in the next area of assessment "Concept of study programme implementation".

### **Guidelines for proper assessment**

We should answer the following questions:

- In view of the discipline/profession, are all basic and other important contents covered according to the goals of the study programme and the professional or scientific title?
- Are the contents correctly vertically and horizontally integrated?
- Is the level of demand of the contents appropriate to the cycle and type of study, as well as to the field or, more specifically, course?
- Are the contents appropriately general or specialised regarding the cycle and type?
- Are the contents appropriately closed for the purpose of applicability or appropriately open and theoretical for further study, deepening of understanding and development of science (depending also on the field of study)?

Too many elective courses lead to vague graduates' profiles.

We should avoid recommendations such as focusing first-cycle university studies on applied and special studies; emphasising the needs of the labor market regardless of the specifics of the study programme; recommending the addition of professional and specialised courses at the expense of theoretical and basic ones; strengthening project work in the study etc. As a rule, university studies must be sufficiently general, broad in content, theoretically oriented, and must introduce students to science and opportunities for further study.

We should avoid the following:

- *shift in epistemic modality* by confusing quality with quantity, when the quality of the syllabus, i.e. its integrity and coherence, is assessed on the basis of mathematical proportions according to the volume of credits of compulsory and elective and basic and specific subjects. Such quantitative relationships do not allow to draw conclusions about the coherence, balance, complexity, quality or distribution of study content – this requires their content analysis, analysis of learning outcomes or competences and study literature;
- *cognitive shift* by confusing quality with quantity, common in counting publications and research projects, which is then the basis of direct statement of the assessment of quality of research work without recognising the intrinsic value of the assessed research work and achievements related to the content of the accredited study programme;
- *shift in phase modality* when assessing study content: despite an in-depth analysis of the study content, which highlights the content-related problems in the syllabus, the assessment ends only with a recommendation that the institute analyse the learning outcomes of each individual course and compare courses. The substantive assessment is thus shifted to the process which will, whatever the outcome, become a sign of quality in itself if such an analysis is merely completed;
- excessive reliance on the assessment of study content and objectives on factors related to meeting the needs of the external environment or the expectations of only selected groups of stakeholders.

Example of assessment according to the first standard for accreditation of a study programme in the field of structure and content of the study programme:

## INTERNAL ASSURANCE AND IMPROVEMENT OF THE QUALITY OF A STUDY PROGRAMME (Article 21 of the Criteria)

**Standard 1: THE HEI SHALL EVALUATE AND UPDATE THE CONTENT, STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY PROGRAMME.**

**Criteria for assessing the standard:**

*a) the self-evaluation of a study programme enables its development and updating by maintaining its relevance and creating a high-quality educational environment*

*(It shall be assessed whether the planning of the self-evaluation of the study programme and the related tasks are focused mainly on the following:*

- *updating the content of the study programme,*
- *assessment of the suitability of the implementation of the study programme, methods and forms of educational work and the work of students,*
- *evaluation of the students' load, their advancement and completion of the study, and state-approved documents,*
- *comparison of the achieved and planned competences or learning outcomes or the assessment of the justification of their modification,*

- *comparison of the achieved and planned competences or learning outcomes or the assessment of the justification of their modification,*
- *assessment of the suitability of testing and assessing knowledge,*
- *assessment of the study conditions and/or study environment and counselling services,*
- *assessment of the expectations, needs and satisfaction of students, higher education teachers and faculty assistants, and stakeholders from the environment,*
- *identification of the needs for knowledge and employment needs in the environment in accordance with Standard 5 of Article 12 of the Criteria;*
- *analysis of the enrolment, transfers and completion of the study;*
- *assessment of the scientific, professional, research or artistic work and the **relevance and extent of achievements** in the field of the study programme.)*

*b) methods and procedures of collecting and analysing information or proposals for the modification of a study programme*

*c) appropriate provision of information to stakeholders on implementing the planned tasks or on the findings and results of the self-evaluation of a study programme*

**Clarifications: The basis for the assessment of the standard – and all quality standards prescribed for the evaluation of the study programme – is the self-evaluation of the study programme or a report on it.** The self-evaluation must be defined in terms of content, taking into account the provisions in brackets in point a); the assessment of self-evaluation procedures alone is not appropriate.

The planning of the self-evaluation may be evident from the self-evaluation plan or the annual work plan of the higher education institution or another relevant document.

### **Most frequent examples of inadequacy in assessment:**

- it is not evident that the standard is assessed in accordance with all the provisions of point a); findings only in individual indents (provisions) or in some cases only a sparse indication that the evaluation of the programme is regular and appropriate;
- as a rule, no information about the evaluation of methods and forms of teaching, adequacy and forms of assessment, topicality and scope of achievements of scientific and research, professional or artistic work in the field of study programme;
- uncritical listing of elements of self-evaluation without the evaluation of their contents – what is assessed is mostly the procedure, persons responsible for individual tasks etc. and not the content;
- neglecting or abandoning the views, opinions, proposals etc. of higher education teachers and associates (including researchers or employers where it is necessary depending on the type and cycle of the study programme); only the student aspect is emphasised;
- uncritical and unexplained proposals to change the programme, without sound consideration and justification – furthermore, proposals for programme modifications belong to Standard 3;

- the assessment of the provisions under points b) and c) is clearly dominated by the student aspect;
- the assessment of the provision under point c) points out only the methods of communication, without an assessment of suitability (taking into account the characteristics of each stakeholder group);
- small number of enrolled students as a strength (it is a fact that cannot constitute a strength in itself).

### **Guidelines for proper assessment**

Self-evaluation must be sufficiently comprehensive, which means that the assessment of the educational, professional, research or artistic activity required for the type and cycle of the study programme must be balanced in terms of content. It must offer an answer to the question of whether and how the institution wants to develop a study programme – both study contents and their modifications and the implementation of studies.

We should establish whether the (self)evaluation contains a thorough and sufficiently comprehensive reflection of the following:

- whether the evaluation of study contents takes into account disciplinary criteria (university study) or professional criteria (profession in the case of higher professional study);
- whether the contents are updated correctly according to the original purpose of the study (perhaps it is a characteristic (purpose) of the study that newer contents are constantly sought and old ones are replaced)? Which “old” contents are necessary and canonic, significant;
- how the modifications of contents affect the correspondence of the syllabus with the discipline, the integrity and balance of its contents;
- what is the relationship between contents and competences in withdrawn courses and contents and competences in newly introduced courses? How, for example, does a new course replace competences from diploma thesis withdrawn from the syllabus (written expression, argumentation, use of scientific apparatus, etc.)? Is abolishing diploma thesis in the name of increasing the number of graduates acceptable;
- how do changes in the implementation of the study affect the transmission of the envisaged knowledge and the achievement of outcomes, goals and competences, especially in view of reducing the number of contact hours or even practical classes;
- Are the effects (suitability, quality...) of accredited contents or modifications considered comprehensively and what is the opinion of various stakeholders about them?

All in connection with the questions we ask at the initial accreditation of a study programme (see the guidelines for assessment at the initial accreditation of a programme).

We should take into account the following: If the study programme is based on a system or school of ideas, or if it is based on knowledge or epistemology from a historical period, the requirements for topicality should be appropriately contextualised instead of requiring the exclusion of important contents due to “obsolescence”. This also depends on the discipline and is, for example, important for humanities, social sciences and arts. Certain disciplinary contents are indisputable and therefore timeless. Not all disciplines or disciplinary specialties are trendy, either. Following trends is mostly the case in applied disciplines.

### (Self)evaluation or assessment of quality of competences or learning outcomes:

What is the analysis of achieving competences and learning outcomes? Is it only about listing average grades and rates of transition/completion of studies?

Does it include the reflection of higher education teachers on the examination and assessment of knowledge and results and on how good students are in their studies?

What is the students' and graduates' opinion on achieving competences or learning outcomes? Is the professional view balanced with the students' view of their own progress in their studies and the quality of acquiring knowledge and skills?

The (self) evaluation of education is important not only at the qualification (competence) level, but also at the socialisation and subjectification levels. It is a reflection on approaches to teaching, the placement of graduates in society, their social and personal skills, and personal growth. In the opinion of experts and in the opinion of graduates, does the institution successfully prepare them for autonomous life in society?

### (Self) evaluation or assessment of professional, scientific, research or artistic or creative work (hereinafter: research):

How thorough is the self-evaluation of the research work?

Is it based solely on bibliometrics in connection with strategic goals?

Does the (self)evaluation also include a reflection on the importance, effects and internal knowledge of the assessed research work?

Is the creation of new knowledge and its relevance for the field of study or programme, even the course, actually assessed (when it makes sense, when it is not a basic, general course)?

Is the assessment focused only on research conditions and accompanying processes such as research planning, conditions, progress monitoring, administrative and organisational challenges – i.e. are there *shifts in phase modality*? What needs to be (self)evaluated is especially the contents, significance or importance of research in itself. The assessment of quality of research work is expected to distinguish between:

- characteristics of different cognitive features of disciplines: hard, soft, pure, applied science; positivist and applied and reflective and hermeneutic science; exact and non-exact research; autonomous and interest-based research; specialised and basic research; technical and political research; statist and critical research;
- different criteria as to their origin/location: basic research should be judged by disciplinary criteria relating to internal quality, originality, evidence-based theory, proximity to the horizon of knowledge and research. External criteria are applied especially to the assessment of applied research – the segment in which already created knowledge is transferred into practice, when the emphasis is no longer so much on science, knowing the truth and deepening reason, but on innovation.

When relying on external criteria, awareness of the complexity of the so-called social relevance of research work is appropriate. It is influenced not only by academic values and disciplinary criteria, but also by the bureaucratic culture (based on rules and representation), the needs of the economy and profit-making, and the public sphere with an emphasis on legal requirements, equality, social benefits and reducing disparities:



- whether we want to seek in the social interest the average of economic and political interests or the need for new interpretations of the natural and social world for our lives;
- whether we will, in seeking quality in the name of social relevance, discover what form of relevance we rely on;
- whether one form of social relevance can cover up the rest ('pars pro toto' shift).

#### Addition to the assessment of teaching:

(Self)evaluation of the quality of teaching cannot be just about the following:

- counting pedagogical and andragogical trainings, teacher exchanges, guest lectures, average grades, rates of transition and completion of studies;
- listing or unfounded recommendation of the introduction of "new" approaches (e.g. student-centered learning) instead of "old" ones, or methods, technologies and techniques in the teaching process;
- discussing the results of students' direct satisfaction with teaching (the problem of replacing professional assessments with attitudes that may be based on comfort, liking and personal gain).

An appropriate distinction needs to be made between the conditions for quality teaching and the direct signs of good teaching.

Is it appropriate to think about the quality of teaching in the context of service satisfaction, and when?

The view of quality of teaching in (self)evaluation cannot be developed only in the context of efficiency, optimality, effectiveness and transparency of teaching (organisational-managerial and economic concept of quality); it is also important to consider professional and academic goals and effects of teaching.

To what extent (and or) is it sensible to connect the quality of teaching with the integrity of the realisation of the curriculum, the contents, goals, outcomes and competences envisaged in it?

Is it appropriate to consider the quality of teaching in terms of resources or in terms of goals or outcomes that are set in advance, indisputable and increasingly decisive? What if the means and ways to achieve the goals become problematic? So how to strike a balance between teaching autonomy on the one hand and external control in terms of efficiency and productivity on the other?

In addition to student opinion, an important source for assessment is teacher reflection – reflection on the purposes and effects or quality of teaching. Professional and academic evaluation of teaching (imparting knowledge, systematising, placing in the discipline, deepening, generalising etc.) is important. Equally important is a discussion about the values and ideals of teaching, about what good teaching is. More specifically, the sources can be: expert survey, focus groups, interviews, external evaluations of teaching (conducted by colleagues in the field on the one hand or higher education didactics specialists on the other), teachers' diaries and professional comments of teachers on students' opinions.

It is important to consider what sets a higher education teacher's work apart from the work of teachers at lower levels of education. Does good teaching depend only on the professional skills that the teacher develops in the context of personnel development, or does it also have other qualities?

It is important to consider the educational attainment of students/graduates according to the qualification, socialisation and subjectification levels.

Is teaching focused on the introduction to the discipline and profession, on the general placement of the individual in society, or on the student as an individual? According to this, how is the view on the quality of teaching diversified (knowledge of different conceptual approaches to teaching with respect to the freedom of teaching)?

How are skills treated and developed – as professional abilities, as abilities of independent learning and information processing, or as abilities of changing or developing oneself (a student)?

It is important to consider the impact of discipline on teaching, i.e. taking into account the criteria or characteristics of disciplinary-specific higher education didactics. Who is actually educated by teachers? Is it theoreticians, applied scientists, critics, creators ... How good are graduates in this respect?

Against this, it is further assessed whether the methods of introduction to the discipline and cultivation of skills are of good quality:

- for example, is the skill of spatial thinking or interpreting and creating maps sufficiently emphasised in the study of geography? How are these skills developed in the field (in field exercises), how in laboratories (in simulations, modelling and experiments) and how in lecture halls or in independent work;
- how does, for example, the study of history, in addition to historical topics aimed at the transfer of knowledge and learning central disciplinary assumptions, develop the emphasis on narrative, critical approach to and questioning of different ideological movements, interpretation, proving.

Without an open discussion with higher education teachers, it is difficult to formulate useful and well-founded recommendations for improvement that go beyond organisational measures. It is also difficult to navigate between (1) different concepts of quality (coherence, fitness for purpose, transformation etc.), (2) different approaches to teaching (traditional, critical, progressive, constructivist, professional etc.) and (3) different disciplinary specifics that characterise education (applicability, disinterest, critical approach, creativity etc.). It is therefore important to know the specifics of (1), (2) and (3).

We should avoid the following:

- insufficient number of assessments of final situations, i.e. on precision, level of criticism, accuracy, verifiability, depth and balance of content in self-evaluation reporting. Which of the above is considered better and which is considered worse? Is there an expert opinion on issues related to professional topics? Or is the self-evaluation predominantly about documenting and listing data without reflection and evaluation;
- a shift to another incompatible characteristic, phenomenon or state, when the attention in assessing the self-evaluation of study contents is shifted to the efficiency of self-evaluation in itself, to the listing of processes or elements of the quality system in general, to transparency and stakeholder inclusion. Although this is also important, especially in institutional issues of operation of quality assurance system, it cannot be the only important feature;
- often somewhat stereotypical and superficial recommendations that communication with stakeholders and their participation in self-evaluation should be improved. It is necessary to identify the problem with the self-evaluation of studies: is it the lack of reflection on study contents, teaching or research work? A lack of arguments supporting the quality of content, modification or implementation?

A good recommendation requires thorough knowledge of the study contents, which enables the recognition of potential deficiencies;

- are modifications, for instance, too beneficial for the expectations and needs of the external environment;
- are disciplinary criteria still complied with;
- are expectations and needs of students met, with a distinction made between direct wishes for comfort and satisfaction and expectations with professional/academic basis.

The examples amply illustrate how the assessment differs between the initial accreditation of a study programme and its external evaluation. In the first case, we assess the written content and composition of the study programme as the compliance with the criteria for them is one of the conditions for granting accreditation; in the second case, we evaluate in practice what has been accredited and is changing, updating, developing etc. along with the teaching, professional, research or artistic activity.

In the way shown above, the guide also includes the assessment of institutions that clearly distinguishes between initial accreditation and reaccreditation. The distinction, however, does not end there; clear content guidelines are also given for the assessment of research-oriented study (university, master's, doctoral study programmes) on the one hand and practically oriented study on the other (higher professional and practice-oriented study programmes), as well as for distinguishing key institutional specifics of various institutions.

The central content of the guide is rounded off by chapters on the reports of groups of experts and cooperation with the Agency staff; the roles of participants in accreditation and evaluation procedures; and, as a special addition, a reflection on assessment in selected areas: the specifics of teaching; cycles and types of study programmes; disciplinary embeddedness of education and research; on the assessment of institutional specifics; a sketch of quality concepts is added.

## **THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION**

Outlined below are the results of the thematic analysis on the quality of international education. It was published in February 2022. It is one of many analyses whose results informed the content of the Guide or guidelines for proper assessment.

This is a thematic analysis of the reports of experts in the procedures of external evaluation of study programmes with (the so-called) international dimension in 2020. The analysis first attempted to show the quality of the assessed study programmes, i.e. what is good, what could be better and where the prescribed quality standards are not met. In addition, it offers views on the characteristics of assessments. The assessment of the characteristics of evaluation practices is derived from the observation of which quality variables (i.e. individual provisions or criteria for the assessment of quality standards) have been addressed by experts more frequently and with what level of criticism. Conclusions are formed on the basis of a pattern of national higher education activity that exceeds the Slovenian higher education area.

Consideration of the scope of internationalisation of Slovenian higher education can be based on the quantitative relationship between groups of study programmes implemented as transnational higher education (VTI), joint study programmes and study programmes implemented at branches abroad, and the population of all accredited study programmes in Slovenia. Of the 977 study programmes currently accredited in Slovenia, a total of 39 have the character of international higher education, which amounts to just under 4% of the higher education offer. From this point of view, Slovenian higher education is poorly internationalised and in quantitative terms shows a small impact on regional and European as well as global higher education.

When considering the advantages of such internationalisation, which were emphasised by experts in an otherwise small sample of evaluation reports, the general contribution of the international dimension of higher education to the development and perhaps even the quality of Slovenian higher education cannot be detected. In some areas of assessment, such as integration into the environment and opportunities for scientific research or professional work, successful international connections do offer good opportunities to improve the quality of studies, which is typical of joint study programmes. In studying at branches abroad and in VTI, the added value of the international dimension of study for students may be limited to the market value of the diploma due to the symbolic value of its origin, and for higher education teachers and management of higher education institutions to business opportunities for cooperation with foreign environment and income from additional teaching obligations.

Based on the written findings and assessments, the quality of international higher education is comparable to higher education in Slovenia; in international implementation, however, risks of non-compliance with national regulations are perceived, which experts pointed out in several reports – these are the cases of implementation of study together with other study programmes, awarding double diplomas and unregulated status of the type and implementation of the study programme. Higher education institutions often organise international studies without legal distinctions between the regulation of ordinary study in Slovenia, VTI, joint study programmes and study at a branch abroad, which not only reduces the transparency and correctness of the regulation of international studies, but also undermines its contribution to the actual quality of higher education in favour of optimisation and seeking market niches.

Due to the small size of the sample, it cannot be concluded that the implementation of a study as VTI is inferior to other types of international higher education at the level of research, human and material resources, and that in these respects joint study programmes are the most successful and better even than studies at branches abroad. Compared to others, joint study programmes are nevertheless distinguished by a stronger institutional background, which provides quality conditions for study, teaching and research. Research activity is generally better in joint study programmes or in second- and third-cycle study programmes. According to the findings and assessments of experts, study as VTI and study at branches abroad are primarily intended for the acquisition and recognition of education to improve competitiveness in the work environment or for the needs of the work environment. Appropriate facilities and study materials are provided for all study programmes.

According to experts, joint study programmes are plagued by the absence of joint self-evaluation and unified documentation and introduction of study changes. In general, however, it can be seen from the findings of groups of experts that the self-evaluation of study content and their changes is markedly deficient.

A look at the characteristics of the analysed external evaluations shows that the evaluation reports do not reveal enough about the direct quality of the study – the quality of its content, modifications, its implementation and the key conditions for it. Recommendations concerning the organisation, management and (self) supervision of studies and issues of providing information to and participation of stakeholders are too frequent. These are recommendations that mainly refer to the processes, techniques and the functional aspect of higher education, but are connected primarily by technocratic rationality. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that such a view of quality is guided by a number of quality standards observed in assessments. Therefore, it is not surprising that questions about the efficiency, formalisation, productivity and transparency of processes at the institution on the one hand and meeting the needs and interests of stakeholders on the other overshadow professional and especially academic views on the quality of study content and implementation of study. The perspective prevailing in quality assessments should therefore be balanced with academic arguments based on disciplinary criteria and the issue of graduates' education attainment. The latter are also commanded by quality standards for the assessment of study programmes in evaluation procedures.

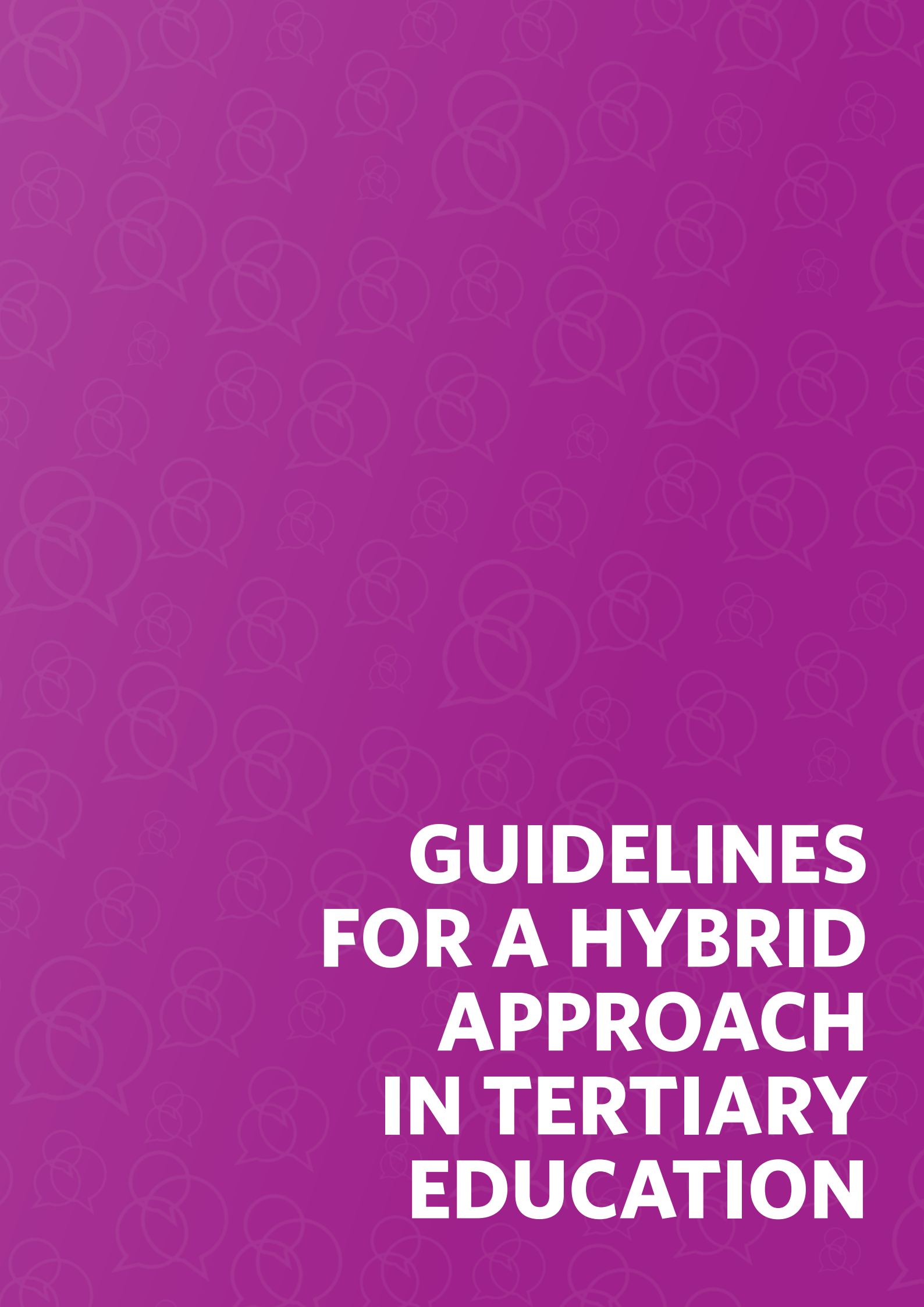
Estimates of the contribution of the international dimension of assessed study programmes to their development and quality are relatively modest. These are assessments of the quality of internationalisation and, above all, its enrichment of study content, study implementation and conditions, as well as assessments of the contribution of the international character of studies to graduates' education attainment, teaching quality and relevance of scientific and research and professional work. As a rule, the basic provisions of consortium agreements or VTI contracts are discussed sparsely. The same applies to their implementation in practice and to fulfilling the commitments of international partners to maintain the envisaged level of study quality. Therefore it is not always possible to find out in the reports whether an agreement or a contract is being implemented at all. What always lacks in the assessment of joint study programmes is evaluation whether consortiums in practice transcend the educational, research and creative capability of individual participating higher education institutions with their levers of mobility.

This finding significantly highlights the above conclusion that the overall contribution of the international dimension of higher education to development cannot be detected. The analysis justifiably points to a consideration of the rationale for reckless or self-evident promotion of the internationalisation of studies if a clear connection between the quality of studies and its internationalisation is not recognised. At the same time, however, such an assessment should be placed in the context of the adequacy of expert group reporting on the contribution of the international dimension of the study. Future external assessments should strictly adhere to additional standards and regulations in writing evaluation reports (e.g. Articles 8 and 15 of the Criteria for International Cooperation and provisions for joint study programmes in the Accreditation Criteria). They could also look more deeply for the potential positive dimensions brought by the hidden curriculum of international studies.

A narrowed view of quality and an insufficiently in-depth assessment of the international dimension of the study lead to a partial assessment of quality and internationalisation according to quality standards. To this must be added a differing comprehensiveness and accuracy of assessments according to individual quality standards, especially according to Standards 4 and 5, which address the quality of the implementation of the study and the conditions for it. Not all evaluation reports, however, answer fundamental questions about the quality of study, such as whether the study, once accredited, is appropriately demanding and embedded in its discipline also in practice; whether it is in fact homogeneous and consistent in terms of its content, objectives, cycle and type; whether it is suitably general, specialised or in-depth; and whether its implementation is qualitatively adapted to these specifics, to which it is necessary to add an academic and not only a technocratic assessment of the quality of teaching and research.

*Tatjana Debevec and mag. Jernej Širok*





# **GUIDELINES FOR A HYBRID APPROACH IN TERTIARY EDUCATION**





The Council of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter: the Agency Council), in cooperation with national and international experts in the field of innovative approaches to distance teaching and learning, drafted and adopted the Guidelines for a Hybrid Approach in Higher and Higher Vocational Education (hereinafter: Guidelines) at its 178th session by correspondence, which took place from 8 to 12 July 2022.

The Guidelines are an independent document supplementing the acts of the Agency Council (primarily the Criteria for Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes and the Criteria for External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges), as well as other adopted documents (the Guide to External Assessments), and are aimed at defining the situation and requirements for the organisation and implementation of the study/education process at higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges (hereinafter: institution/college), and at the improvement of the internal quality assurance systems.

The content of the Guidelines is based on the experiences and needs identified in the transition to emergency remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they also aim to chart a course for the development of hybrid and blended learning, including the use of advanced technological solutions, and for the needs of the future.

During the emergency, most institutions/colleges sought technological solutions in videoconferencing platforms (Zoom, MS Teams), which were not primarily intended for education, but are in fact communication or videoconferencing tools with additional functionalities (chat, whiteboard, library, calls, breakout rooms, etc.) that extend the user experience of remote access meetings.

The Guidelines define a set of adaptations and underline the aspects that are important for creating a more personalised and appealing learning environment, combining accountability in quality assurance concepts and innovation in teaching (adapted higher education didactics) and learning using the most advanced technological solutions, maintaining the role of higher education teachers as the cornerstone of teaching and promoting student-centered education while being based on the concepts of equity, inclusion, accountability, professionalism and innovation.

The Guidelines are aimed at institutions/colleges, students and Agency experts involved in the accreditation and evaluation processes of institutions/colleges and study programmes.

In order to develop the starting points and Guidelines, the Agency worked together with various experts with experience in the fields of hybrid learning (Dr Jana Javornik), innovative teaching and learning methods (Dr Janez Vogrinc), the development of new pedagogical and andragogical approaches (Dr Marko Radovan), the Head of the Digitalisation of Education Service (Dr Igor Pesek), a student representative (Omar Smajlović), a representative of the Slovenian Rectors Conference (Dr Tanja Urbančič), a representative of the Community of Independent Higher Education Institutions (Dr Janko Žmitek), and an expert in the field of telecommunications and multimedia (Dr Janez Bešter).

## DEFINITIONS

**Traditional learning** – This term refers to traditionally organised studies (on-site, ex-cathedra, in-person or on-campus), where all the study process takes place physically on the premises of the institution/college or other accredited premises.

**Online learning** – Online learning comprises all the means of organising and carrying out the study process at a distance, where the study programme is organised and carried out exclusively in an online (virtual) format.

**Blended learning** – This is a form of education that combines traditional and online learning. Students have the opportunity to take part in the study process using online and information and communication technologies (ICT) and solutions, while also completing their obligations at the higher education institution in person. Unlike hybrid learning, blended learning is used as a complementary rather than an exclusive substitute for on-site, in-person teaching and learning. Blended learning is based on a linear time-based progression, where all students complete part of their course requirements in the traditional way and part of their course requirements in a virtual environment (the proportions may vary).

**Hybrid learning** – An innovative learning (educational) environment created by combining virtual and physical space and using digital technologies and online tools. At the same time, appropriate support and services are provided for all participants. The innovation of the hybrid concept is provided by the constantly evolving IT solutions that are changing the learning society and at the same time shaping its requirements and expectations. All the students can participate in the virtual environment, wherever they are. All the study programmes are offered to students in parallel, and they choose the way they take part. Everyone (in the classroom and online) is given the same experience, the same objectives and the same competences and learning outcomes as set out in the study programme.

**Blended/hybrid learning** – Both these types include online and in-person learning, but the main difference is in the way the studies are organised. While, in the hybrid model, students are present both on-site and online (students as different individuals), in the blended model the same students participate partly in person and partly online.

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an immediate and serious challenge to the higher education space, not only for institutions/colleges, teachers, researchers and students, but also for other stakeholders who (co-) shape it (NAKVIS, the Ministry of Science and Sport, the Slovenian Student Union, employers, research organisations and institutes, social partners, etc.). Various analyses and surveys already carried out by the European Commission during the first and second waves of the 2020 pandemic, as well as by national organisations and institutions (e.g. the Slovenian Student Union), have clearly shown that the space was not ready for the transition to online learning, which happened practically overnight. In practice, the level of preparedness, competence and equipment of educational institutions and individuals in the learning process varied widely, but in most cases was merely adequate, and almost everyone agreed that the pandemic would be a turning point in the use of technology in education, training and even everyday life.

The challenges that were observed during the emergency (online) teaching and learning touched on all aspects of education, from material conditions and equipment, digital literacy, management and governance systems at institutions/colleges, support and advisory services, accessibility of resources, security issues, to the lack of relevant knowledge, skills, competences and, last but not least, experience.

Just like other stakeholders, the Agency faced such challenges, which subsequently changed the way we operate and have empowered the Agency with new and advanced technological solutions (digitalisation of operations and management, implementation of procedures online, working from home). Even though the transition to remote access was relatively easy (thanks to the technological and IT support and mechanisms that we started to implement more intensively in 2018), we also had to adapt our external quality assurance system to the Slovenian higher education area. To this end, we developed the [Guidelines for Conducting a Distance Site Visit](#).

Enriched by the experience of the pandemic and the transition to emergency teaching and learning, we charted a future direction for development and included sustainability as one of our strategic goals, while also promoting digitalisation and inclusion. In line with the vision for the future of higher education as presented by the European Commission as part of Europe's recovery after the pandemic, we are committed to high-quality higher education and its green and digital transition to Society 5.0.

We are aware that the entire educational landscape is undergoing a transformation, not only due to the introduction of new paradigms and approaches to teaching and learning, new ways and channels of communication and interaction, but also due to the need for higher education institutions to be adequately prepared for new challenges (pandemics or natural disasters, improved governance and management of resources, and teaching expectations and demands). In particular, it is important that new models such as hybrid learning help to make higher education more accessible to a wider range of learners (employees who want to complete or upgrade their qualifications, all those who want to improve their competences, international students who do not want to (or cannot) move or take part in physical mobility, etc.).

It is worth noting that, despite the changes, our primary mission remains the same. As the guardian of quality in higher education, the Agency took the initiative to develop these guidelines for a hybrid approach in tertiary education in cooperation with external experts (national and international) in the field of innovative approaches in teaching and learning.

We would like to point out that the concept of hybrid learning is a new concept, which has only started to take off in earnest in 2021 in response to the above-mentioned emergency situation in education during and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept should not be equated with hybrid concepts which have been discussed by various experts in the past (e.g. Christensen, Horn and Staker, 2013<sup>1</sup>) and which represent a hybrid as an intermediate stage of development and a link between traditional (physical) learning and fully online learning.

---

<sup>1</sup> Christensen, C.M., Horn, M.B. and Staker, H. (2013). Is K-12 Blended Learning Disruptive? An introduction to the theory of hybrids. The Clayton Christensen Institute. Available at: <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Is-K-12-Blended-Learning-Disruptive.pdf>

Unlike the new hybrid learning (2021), the old concept combined old and new technologies, considered only existing users and participants (not new ones), and advocated the idea that it would provide users with an experience at least comparable to the traditional model, while at the same time interfering to a limited extent with the habits of the participants, in order to make the transition as unperceivable and smooth as possible.

The concept of hybrid learning follows some of the key principles that should underpin other forms of blended learning:

- creates a more personalised and appealing learning environment,
- responsibly combines quality and innovation in teaching and learning with the use of advanced technological solutions (taking into account the specificities of different scientific disciplines and learning environments),
- combines advanced technology with high-quality (personalised) higher education didactics, preserving the role of higher education teachers as the cornerstone of teaching and education, while promoting the introduction of student-centered education,
- is based on the concepts of fairness, inclusion, professional qualifications and the creation of a suitable infrastructure.

The basis for the development of the Guidelines for a Hybrid Approach in Tertiary Education is a study by Dr Jana Javornik prepared for the Agency in February 2022, which is based on a systematic review and meta-analysis of 47 studies of hybrid approaches in higher education by Raes, Detienne, Windey and Depaeppe (2020); a review of the grey literature; a review of the activities of supranational institutions (OECD, European Commission, Council of Europe, UNESCO); and on the basis of the Agency's own experience of the development and deployment of a number of hybrid models at the University of Leeds (UK). It is worth noting that the hybrid concept is a relatively new approach in higher education, research is scarce, primarily qualitative and does not include Slovenia (Javornik, 2022), so the study focuses on the synchronous hybrid model while the Guidelines address different forms of the hybrid approach.

## **THE CONCEPT OF A HYBRID LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The period of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced education to move to remote access (online or blended) literally overnight, and the time after the pandemic will be shaped by new forms and ways of organising and implementing education, characterised by the predominant use of technological and online solutions. The study published by the [Deloitte Center for Higher Education Excellence \(2022<sup>2</sup>\)](#) examines how institutions/colleges that adopted a hybrid model (a mix between traditional – in-person and online) of teaching and learning in the last two years can transfer this model to other services and activities provided by the institution/college as part of its activities. The characteristics identified will become permanent (at least to some extent) and will transform institutions/colleges. The key findings related to the hybrid concept of education are that:

- it goes beyond our current notion of blended learning towards the development of a more holistic vision that enables the academic community to benefit from all the services and activities provided by the institution/college (teaching, research, collaboration, also career guidance);
- it makes education more accessible to a wider and more diverse range of students;
- it enables better results and better sense of belonging, regardless of where students come from;
- it enables the management of the institution/college to better manage both financial resources and teaching requirements by individualising the experience in this way;
- it encourages innovation in teaching and learning;
- it monitors and promotes the analytics of the institution's/college's study programmes and support and advisory services.

---

<sup>2</sup> Selingo, J. (2022). The Hybrid Campus: Three major shifts for the post- COVID university. The Deloitte Center for Higher Education Excellence. Available at: [https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/articles/6756\\_CGI-Higher-ed-COVID/DI\\_CGI-Higher-ed-COVID.pdf](https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/articles/6756_CGI-Higher-ed-COVID/DI_CGI-Higher-ed-COVID.pdf)

Institutions/colleges that already had at least a basic set of digital tools in place before the COVID-19 pandemic to engage students (both those physically present in the classroom and those participating remotely) on an equal footing were better able to cope with the transition to a hybrid or fully online environment, as they understood how to meet the needs and expectations of students and teachers in both in-person (traditional) and remote modes.

Higher and higher vocational education has a very long tradition of formally and informally shaping students' social skills by enabling physical interaction between professors and students, researchers and other staff, as well as between mentors and peers. In contrast to such a physical experience, the hybrid concept of education offers an altered way of living and working in a technological world where stakeholders work, collaborate, research and communicate. It is not just blended learning, but a hybrid, comprehensive and digital-living concept that combines traditional and online learning spaces. The objectives and outcomes of in-person and hybrid learning are therefore not significantly different.

What is crucial for institutions/colleges in this regard is not only the use and choice of appropriate web and technology tools and solutions, but a change in the culture of quality, in the understanding of all those involved and in their (co-)operation.

At the Slovenian level (ANDI - Action Plan for Digital Education), as well as at the EU level (React-EU and Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027), activities and measures are being designed and incentives are being planned to ensure digital learning capacities across the entire vertical axis.

## **DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF HYBRID HIGHER EDUCATION**

As Dr Jana Javornik (2022) mentions in her study, hybrid learning is an innovative learning (educational) environment created by combining virtual and physical space with the help of digital technologies and online tools. At the same time, appropriate support and services are provided for all participants. The innovation of the hybrid concept is provided by the constantly evolving IT solutions that are changing the learning society and at the same time shaping its requirements and expectations.

The concept of hybrid learning extends the full range of educational activities into the digital environment, while providing the support and services that are typical of the physical environment.

But it is not only the transition to a new hybrid way of learning that dictates change. The paradigm shift in teaching and learning needs to be considered in a broader context. It is also accompanied by a paradigm shift in research and development and, ultimately, in much of society. Despite unpredictable technological developments, it is essential to establish the basic frameworks for such potential, while defining and consistently respecting the core values for monitoring the introduction of advances in education, in order to raise general awareness in the academic and research spheres. These values include: openness, inclusion, academic and research integrity, sustainability, innovation and creating active citizenship.

The synchronous hybrid learning model (Javornik, 2022) is a hybrid classroom/environment where students participate simultaneously in person and online, managing a digital platform from a physical classroom. By combining two learning environments, online and physical, with the help of ICT, a new format of teaching and learning is created - the hybrid model. Studies of the model (Raes, Detienne, Windey and Depaepe, 2020) conclude that the hybrid approach creates a more personalised and appealing learning environment compared to established virtual (distance/online) and in-person teaching, but also poses a number of challenges. However, it certainly offers a more diverse and inclusive higher education space for all stakeholders.

The asynchronous model of hybrid learning, on the other hand, is a model that is aimed at students in virtual classrooms, but differs significantly from the synchronous model. It is not delivered simultaneously, but offers access to pedagogical content (quizzes, simulations, forum discussions, etc.) at any time and from anywhere, and does not necessarily involve real-time participation in the teaching process.

The asynchronous model allows students to learn at their own pace, but within a generally defined timeframe. Its main advantage is the flexibility in terms of time, space and content (in line with the curriculum), as the students are free to manage their own time, space and, to a certain extent, the content of their studies. This does not mean that their progress is not regularly monitored, but it does mean that students have more responsibility and freedom to organise their studies on their own or in a group, in order to complete the requirements set out in the study programme in a timely and high-quality manner, and to achieve the learning outcomes and competences. At the same time, all the support (teaching, technical, IT and personal) is provided.

Both models have in common that learners can join the study process from anywhere, as there are no space constraints (only time constraints); real-time communication with teachers, networking and collaboration with other learners (students). The differences are mainly seen in the time component and the use of a range of teaching methods (e.g. immediate response to candidate performance after the quiz is completed/taken - asynchronous model vs. participation in a live discussion, regardless of whether students are in a lecture hall or an online classroom - synchronous model).

# GUIDELINES

*The basic ideas of these Guidelines can also be applied mutatis mutandis to other forms of blended or online learning.*

## **1. APPROPRIATE USE OF ICT, ONLINE TOOLS AND SUPPORT**

Given the constant evolution of information technology and online tools, it is of utmost importance that ICT and online tools used for hybrid education are neither prescribed nor restricted. It is important to plan thoughtfully, to keep up-to-date with innovations and to be flexible according to the specificities of the learning environment, participants, discipline, situation and resources. Technology will be considered in a very broad sense, in terms of hardware, software, web resources, as well as support services for the implementation of these tools. The use of ICT in the educational process, namely, requires a high level of digital literacy, competence and organisation of education providers and participants (Javornik, 2022). It is important to stress that technology is constantly changing and developing, so any restriction or prescription on the use or tools is both pointless and impossible. It should be noted that technology alone does not, of course, imply a successful implementation of the hybrid model, but is merely a tool or system that enables its implementation, where the issue of security should not be neglected (Bates, 2019<sup>1</sup>).

Prerequisites for the successful implementation of a hybrid approach in education:

- Adapting workflow to better understand the expectations, requirements and capabilities of the institution/college, which can help to optimise human potential, improve service activities and support both the institution/college and the staff.
- Selection (or development) of an appropriate and stable technological infrastructure to support the management and monitoring of the teaching process, hybrid and virtual interaction, and enable collaboration, communication, exchange, simulation environment and virtual private networking.
- Adapting the working environment through the use of ICT and online tools that goes beyond the constraints of physical space, and setting up a network to provide appropriate support and advisory services for students and teachers.
- Broadband internet access for all involved in the education process, both in institutions/colleges and where different stakeholders access these tools.

## **HARDWARE**

The basic definition of technology usually refers to the hardware used in the study process. This primarily refers to the computer or mobile phone/tablet, and in the future also to virtual and augmented reality devices and, of course, the internet that connects these devices. This is the basis for the successful implementation of the hybrid model in education, which also raises the issue of access and inequality, and is discussed in more detail below. Most of the communication in the synchronous hybrid model takes place via videoconferencing environments, so it is important that all participants have the appropriate support equipment such as microphones, headsets and cameras. The institution/college shall allow teachers and students to use appropriate hardware to participate in the study process if they are unable to provide it themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bates, A.W. (2015) Teaching in a Digital Age: Guidelines for Designing Teaching and Learning Vancouver BC: Tony Bates Associates.

## SOFTWARE

“Live” online teaching is considered to be the best approximation to traditional teaching (see Makovec Radovan and Radovan, 2021<sup>2</sup>), which is facilitated by various videoconferencing applications (e.g. Zoom, MS Teams, Webex, etc.); it should be pointed out at this point that these applications are not yet educational tools in themselves. Most institutions/colleges have already implemented Learning Management Systems (LMS), which, with the recent general digital revolution in education, have become the basis for effective interactive integration of teachers, students and study content. The most widespread in Slovenia is the open-source Moodle platform, while some institutions/colleges have even developed their own solutions (e.g. based on the MiTeam platform, which the MiTeam authors, in agreement with the institutions, have adapted to the specific needs of their online and hybrid learning and other processes). The most sophisticated systems of this kind, at least in theory, offer a complete solution for organising hybrid learning, combining all the necessary digital tools for remote collaboration and monitoring of the study process in a single system, including everything from databases, forums, online classrooms to integrated videoconferencing applications. The institution/college shall provide access to licensed or open-source software for all participants in the study process, subject to specific software requirements.

## SOLUTION ARCHITECTURE (HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE)

The range of different hardware and software used by higher education teachers, staff and students should provide a unified user experience when using different ICT. To avoid a sense of fragmentation in its use, it is necessary to think towards providing an infrastructure solution that effectively connects and integrates the various ICTs that are frequently used among teachers. It is recommended that hardware and software are interconnected, that users access them with the same username and unique authentication, and that they are linked to back-office administrative systems (e.g. student information systems).

For the efficient operation and integration of the various hardware and software mentioned above, a **common** production server infrastructure (web servers, application servers, databases, peak-load redundancy, backup hardware, etc.) as well as hardware and software to enable the integration or interconnection of the various solutions in use at the institutions/colleges must be provided.

The diagram shows the conceptual design of such a solution called Integrated Learning Environment (ILE) based on the example of the University of Ljubljana, which comprehensively addresses the support of the implementation of hybrid teaching (and other ICT-supported forms of teaching and learning) with the envisaged integration of:

- online classrooms (or the teaching management systems described above);
- an application environment for capturing multimedia content (e.g. classroom lectures, short video clips, capture from personal equipment, etc.);
- an educational repository for structured multimedia content depositing;
- video portal and other forms of multimedia display and playback;
- dedicated web-based applications for creating interactive presentations, collaborative creation of materials, formative monitoring of students' knowledge and progress (e.g. Mentimeter, Formative, Kahoot, IORAD, iSpring, Trello, Nearpod, Padlet, etc.).
- and others.

---

<sup>2</sup> Makovec Radovan, D. in Radovan, M. (2020). Smernice za izvajanje poklicnega in strokovnega izobraževanja v kombinirani obliki. Center za strokovno in poklicno izobraževanje. Available at: <https://cpi.si/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/cpi-smernice-ku.pdf>



## TRAINING

A common criticism of the above-mentioned education systems is that they are complex and unmanageable. The use of new technological solutions in the study process requires great flexibility and, above all, the competence of all those involved. It is therefore essential for institutions/colleges to provide technical support and ongoing training for staff and students in the use of new ICT tools. It should be reiterated that the mere inclusion of a new technology in the study process does not presuppose its effective application without considering its actual usability, support services and teaching challenges, and familiarising oneself with the potential challenges that the new technology brings.

## LIBRARY AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Where an institution/college organises and implements hybrid (or blended) learning, it is advisable to have a clear strategy for the development of its library and support services. The strategy should include solutions for additional training on classification systems, the use of different quotation methods and reference management.

The strategic orientations for the development of the library should include:

- an material resource adequacy plan;
- a plan to empower higher education libraries as a vehicle for sharing knowledge in the academic and research/professional community;
- help with the provision, use and management of open access resources;
- strengthening cooperation between teachers, researchers and the library;
- the library's educational activities (the library as a space for digital literacy and addressing academic integrity, an environment for transferring good practices of networking and collaboration, empowering the tutoring system – the possibility of introducing virtual tutoring systems);
- creating new spaces (physical and virtual) where communities of learners are formed;
- supporting technologies for students with special needs, - alternative and compensatory tools.

Hybrid learning does not mean the death of the library, but its reactivation. An example of good practice is the University of Leeds Library, which has been organised in a hybrid model for over a decade, with comprehensive access to e-services and support for students at all levels and for staff – helping the latter to select and plan their use of digital resources, to acquire and create new digital resources, and to manage, secure and share digital resources.

Larger university environments are setting up specific support services to support the use of ICT in the teaching process. The range of support activities required for the implementation of hybrid learning, as well as other forms of ICT-supported teaching process, is relatively extensive and highly multidisciplinary. It ranges from empowering teachers and students, through didactic and technical training, didactic and technical consultancy, provision of hardware and software infrastructure, and above all the often neglected development (of innovative didactic approaches and technological solutions), to networking with other stakeholders who are responsible for business processes, compliance and quality assurance of the teaching process in the educational environment.

A good example of organisation of such a support service is e.g. KU Leuven Learning Lab (<https://www.kuleuven.be/english/education/leuvenlearninglab/team/about-us>), while examples from Slovenia include those from the University of Ljubljana, Centre for the use of ICT in pedagogical process (<https://digitalna.uni-lj.si/>) or from the University of Maribor, Teaching support centre (<https://didakt.um.si/Strani/Vstopna.aspx>).

## SECURITY

An area that is often neglected, even in the face of the urgent shift to online learning, is ensuring security, privacy and rules for managing new resources and sensitive digital content.

The correct use of privacy and copyright rules, understanding of use and granting of rights for open licences and open educational resources, including terms of use, should be ensured. It is important to critically assess the credibility and reliability of digital resources and to consider potential restrictions on the use or re-use of digital resources (e.g. copyright, file type, technical requirements, legal provisions, accessibility) (Javornik, 2022).

Solutions that store data in the cloud must comply with EU directives.

## **2. ADAPTED AND INNOVATIVE TEACHING APPROACHES IN HYBRID LEARNING**

In all forms and modes of hybrid learning (including blended), mechanisms and approaches for a continuously learning community of teachers at the institution/college need to be put in place, while at the same time adapting the student-centred focus. The hybrid concept deals with a heterogeneous group of students and therefore places particular emphasis on equal integration and inclusion and cohesiveness of the group; at the same time, it requires teachers and those responsible for the implementation of the study process to be attentive and to interact smoothly and to prevent or successfully overcome possible setbacks and interruptions in the interaction.

Timely and thorough planning of hybrid learning is an important element that influences the success of its organisation and implementation. It must ensure equal involvement (and education) of diverse groups, as it allows access from anywhere as well as the involvement of external stakeholders and experts regardless of their location, which facilitates contacts and exchanges with external stakeholders. The objectives of the programme should therefore be defined in a timely manner and adapted to the learning environment, the programme and the needs of students and teachers while monitoring their implementation on an ongoing basis. In doing so, the institution/college should provide support and advice to teaching staff and students to improve digital and pedagogical practice (in the form of ongoing didactic and technical support, workshops and training, etc.).

The provision of support, advice and timely feedback enables the ongoing and flexible development of digital teaching practice and practice of the education community. It is important that digital and online technologies enable collaboration between different groups, different teachers, where the exchange of knowledge and experience leads to joint innovation and more effective transfer of teaching practices. Teaching practices should include modified or complemented teaching and didactic approaches adapted to the educational context, learning objectives and competences, and to different approaches and groups of students.

Support from additional staff (tutors, assistants, consultants – professionals with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary competences), additional education and training in the use of new approaches, technical and substantive assistance, and lifelong pedagogical training and keeping abreast of pedagogical trends must be provided.

The use of digital technologies and services takes place both inside and outside the learning unit/study programme, so support is needed to test and develop new forms and formats to provide guidance and support on the one hand and to reproduce and update resources, obtain permissions, provide access and effectively secure sensitive digital content on the other.

When organising the study process, it is advisable to structure lessons in such a way that the various digital and virtual activities are geared towards strengthening learning objectives and competences.

The evaluation and assessment of the knowledge, competences and skills acquired as well as the appropriateness of ICT and online approaches must be carefully planned and, in addition to questions about how to evaluate knowledge, must also take into account the integrity of the individual, their privacy and inviolability, especially where the use of ICT and online tools could severely interfere with them.

The concern that recorded lectures would cause staff to lose their jobs is redundant in a hybrid approach, as the role of the teacher has become even more demanding and empowered. Hybrid learning does not mean watching recorded lectures – these can be just one of the tools/accessories in the work concept. Moreover, the synchronous hybrid approach requires additional staff if it is to be of good quality. Teachers are required to simultaneously lecture and communicate with students in real time in a physical space. Other adaptations (asynchronous and combined) can be done in different ways, e.g. by simultaneously playing pre-recorded content or using podcasts/vlogs that are (easily) available with a time limit. It is important to enable students to use digital technologies as part of collaborative tasks, as a means to improve communication, collaboration, joint knowledge creation and interactivity and to make materials dynamic, which requires the broadening of teaching and didactic tools or the integration of external didactic e-services.

The main characteristics of learning communities (wherever they are formed) are therefore trust, knowledge creation, information sharing, a sense of connectedness, shared goals and the belief that the needs of students will be met in these communities.

Key points:

- digitally competent education and training staff enjoying ongoing organisational and implementation support (institutional);
- adequate IT support (infrastructure); accessibility, connectivity and quality digital equipment; services, licences and the means to update and maintain them, comprehensively supporting the student cycle from registration through enrolment, study and residence to graduation;
- high quality and relevant learning content and resources tailored to the students and the learning environment; the updates include technical and support staff involved in the organisation and implementation of the programme;
- established mechanisms for co-creating learning content and collecting and analysing student and learner feedback on an ongoing basis;
- different levels of assessment that do not always tend towards numerical marking. Adaptation of requirements in view of the group/work already done, greater flexibility for achieving competences;
- critical assessment of the credibility and reliability of digital resources: considering potential restrictions on the use or re-use of digital resources (e.g. copyright, file type, technical requirements, legal provisions, accessibility);
- user-friendly and accessible environments, tools and secure platforms that respect digital privacy rules and ethical standards; and
- effective institutional planning and development of digital capacities, including modern organisational capacities and leadership.

Coordination between students in the classroom and those who follow the lecture via electronic devices is about creating an environment that enables working and learning suited to everyone's needs. The successful integration of the two groups of students (those in the classroom – in-person and those in remote access) is technically supported by ICT. The responsibility for appropriate pedagogical integration lies with the teacher, who is aware of what the technology enables and of the appropriate teaching approach.

The teaching dimension is the factor that in many ways combines social and cognitive elements and ensures a (co-)functioning learning community of students and teachers. Three elements to consider when designing hybrid learning:

1. Planning and organisation of learning refers to the activities that are usually carried out by teachers themselves before the beginning of learning activities. It is therefore about preparing the learning environment, such as materials, activities, instructions, etc.
2. Encouraging discussion – includes activities in which students can participate alongside the teacher.
3. Teaching, traditionally the central role of a teacher and the one for which they have been best trained in the course of their education. Teaching and facilitating learning in a virtual learning environment is a particularly challenging task for the teacher, who has to simultaneously take into account and attend to the characteristics of both the social and the cognitive dimensions of learning, to ensure the development of a supportive atmosphere, and to coordinate various individual or group activities of the students.

In addition to achieving the learning objectives, the purpose of encouraging discussion is to keep students interested, motivated and engaged. The importance of the teacher's influence on the outcomes of learning activities and student achievement in virtual learning environments has been empirically confirmed in many studies (Fiock, 2020<sup>1</sup>), while the teacher has been shown to be a key factor in generating and encouraging and developing a sense of belonging to these communities (Makovec Radovan and Radovan, 2021).

### **3. STUDENTS**

Of course, participants themselves have to take an essential part of the responsibility for their own learning. They must be able to create good conditions for their studies and plan their time and activities accordingly. The individual's abilities and time management skills, as well as motivation, are important. Lack of physical presence and involvement at the institution/college can create various feelings of exclusion, disconnectedness or disengagement, which can have very serious consequences over time; this is why the support and counselling provided by the institution/college, and in particular the ongoing and prompt identification of such conditions and immediate action, is crucial to maintain an adequate level of motivation, participation and progression. Learning analytics can also play a crucial role in this by monitoring student activity, responsiveness and progress in real time.

Students' passivity, lack of motivation and feelings of exclusion can also be a response to inappropriate teaching practices, which is why teaching processes need to be brought closer to the student in order to facilitate their inclusion and engagement. In addition to teachers, a key role is played by tutors (student tutors, teacher tutors and teaching assistants), who help, advise and guide students in their study process. It is important to stress that the number of participants per tutor should not be too high.

A hybrid approach to education provides students with greater access and convenience (independence from the place of study), which can improve learning, reduce (or adjust) costs, make it easier to balance commitments, allow flexibility and even personalise study.

The areas that should be included in the strategic documents of the institution/college and taken into account when planning the internal quality system are the following:

information and media literacy;

- efficient and responsible use of digital technologies for life;
- cognitive activation and improved communication in relation to alienation and communication difficulties;
- monitoring and self-organisation of learning, combined with appropriate skills in application, learning and digital problem-solving and collaboration;
- balancing study and family/work life in terms of time and organisation;
- inclusive education (in the broadest sense of the word: all those from deprived backgrounds, people with disabilities, people from other linguistic backgrounds, migrants, refugees, to name but a few examples) and time management;
- limitations (access to technologies, internet etc.).

### **4. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Academic integrity is more than a moral code or an ethical policy, more than an academic standard and benchmark. It is a way of living, thinking, behaving and acting; it represents the state of mind of individuals and is embedded in the collective mind of both communities and institutions/colleges at different levels. It brings together the principles and values of the academic society, of teachers, institution/college management and students alike, and is the moral compass of an institution.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fiock, H. (2020). Designing a Community of Inquiry in Online Courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 21(1), 135-153. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i5.3985>.

Although the ZViS does not mention academic integrity in its provisions, it is important from the point of view of the quality assurance system that the topic of academic integrity is addressed in the self-evaluation procedures and that the elements of monitoring and improvement are included in the internal quality assurance system of the institution/college.

The [International Center for Academic Integrity](#) defines 6 fundamental values of academic integrity:

1. **Honesty:** an academic community with a high level of integrity is committed to the pursuit of truth and knowledge with intellectual and personal honesty in learning, teaching, research and services.
2. **Trust:** an academic community with a high degree of integrity fosters and builds relationships on mutual trust. A climate of trust encourages and supports the free exchange of ideas, allowing scientific research and education to reach its maximum potential.
3. **Responsibility and accountability:** an academic community with a high degree of integrity is based on the personal responsibility of individuals and communities to act by setting an example in all circumstances and challenges, to uphold mutually agreed standards and rules, and to take action when they encounter misconduct.
4. **Respect:** an academic community with a high degree of integrity respects the interactive, collaborative, participatory nature of learning. It respects, appreciates and takes into account different opinions and ideas.
5. **Fairness:** an academic community with a high degree of integrity establishes clear and transparent expectations, standards and practices for fairness in interactions between students, teachers and the institution/college.
6. **Courage:** developing and sustaining a community with a high degree of integrity requires more than just believing in core values. Translating values from paper into action, often in the face of pressure and distress, requires determination, commitment and courage.

Discussions on academic integrity usually end with plagiarism; they less often point out other deviant acts such as cheating, dishonesty, bullying and other forms of academic misconduct, and how best to prevent them. A more productive approach involves focusing on the promotion of positive values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage as intrinsic motivators for ethical academic practice. Academic integrity is much more than a “student issue” and requires the commitment of all stakeholders in the academic community, including students, teachers, established researchers, management, policy makers and support staff.

In a broader sense, academic integrity is the cornerstone of university life and of academic and scientific communities, and should be continuously strengthened and promoted.

The development of (innovative) technological solutions and their wider availability has also given rise to new, hitherto less well-known abuses designed exclusively to promote breaches of academic integrity. They arise in the preparation of students' independent work, in remote access examinations, in group work and even in research and projects. Contract cheating providers have recently become particularly accessible and flexible according to market conditions and demand, offering ready-made analyses, assignments, expert and other opinions, questionnaires and even theses against payment.

Another form is cheating and unfair practices in examinations taken online, where we can see identity fraud (someone else taking an exam instead of the registered student), copying (various gadgets and devices that allow cheating during exams) and more.

These are just the tip of the iceberg, and it is important to adequately inform and raise awareness of actions that affect the principles of academic integrity, to encourage honest behaviour, to set an example and to communicate openly and proactively, as well as to detect breaches of academic integrity on a continuous and consistent basis and to have zero tolerance for such actions.

## 5. QUALITY ASSURANCE

The group of experts assesses quality against the quality standards set out in the Criteria for the Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes (the “Accreditation Criteria”) and the Criteria for the External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges (the “Higher Vocational Colleges Criteria”), in which the assessment of compliance with the standards should be supplemented with the specificities of hybrid (or blended) learning.

*The guidelines are applied mutatis mutandis on the assessment of blended learning.*

The structure and content of a study programme must ensure that the content and the horizontal and vertical coherence of the learning units of the programme are the same in the case of hybrid learning as in the case of a traditional learning. If a transition (change) to a new form of education or study implementation is being considered, it should be examined how it will affect the completeness of the programme content. The assessment of study programme change and updating should focus on both the content and the source of change (self-evaluation) and the introduction of new methods, the use of appropriate ICT and web-based solutions, the provision of relevant digital competences, the change of teaching approaches and the provision of accessibility. The structure and content of the study programme should also be assessed in terms of its design, the teaching approaches planned and used, the revised/improved curricula and the internal quality assurance system.

In the design and implementation of the study, the emphasis is on a clear plan and actual implementation, the degree of flexibility, the qualifications of the staff for the new way of teaching (adapted higher education didactics) and the material conditions presented in the previous chapters. The hybrid implementation format brings many challenges, especially in the part of the “traditional” learning that is, in principle, implemented only physically, e.g. the implementation of (laboratory and clinical) exercises, practical training, oral defences of theses, written exams, etc. The justification and appropriateness of the hybrid implementation shall be assessed in relation to the discipline, cycle and type of study programme and other requirements and specificities (e.g. clinical work, scientific, research and artistic work, practical training, etc.).

Although learning may be personalised, it should still ensure consistency of learning and equal delivery of competences. Student-centred learning can be compatible with greater individuality and freedom in study, but only with appropriate guidance, the use of study-appropriate approaches and regular monitoring of individual students' progress, and awareness of their roles and responsibilities. The way in which students and others involved in the study process (teachers, researchers, external collaborators) are monitored and provided with appropriate support, counselling services and rights is assessed. It should be borne in mind that the experience of all those participating in a hybrid learning process (those on-site and those in the virtual environment) changes as everyone participates in the virtual learning process.

In addition to the adequacy and competence of staff in accordance with Article 13 of the Accreditation Criteria and Article 7 of the Criteria for Higher Vocational Colleges, it is important that academic staff and students are adequately trained for the new way of teaching and learning, as well as that there is adequate (additional) technical and administrative support and staffing available. The use of modern technological and teaching approaches suitable for hybrid learning is assessed, as well as their diversity, usefulness and appropriateness. The role of tutors or mentors also needs to be reasonably integrated into hybrid implementation.

In addition to Article 15 of the Accreditation Criteria and Article 9 of the Criteria for Higher Vocational Colleges, the assessment of material conditions should address: how the virtual environment complements or replaces the physical environment, the accessibility of the material to students, the variety of formats of the material, the integration of different online databases, the facilitation of real-time communication, equal interaction between students and group work, the role of the library, etc. It is important to ensure the relevance of contact hours and not simply replace them with other resources in the digital form (such as recordings of lectures); the latter are an additional option for students to better understand the content and organise their notes through multiple viewings, but not a substitute for in-person lectures.

The self-evaluation of hybrid learning must be clearly planned in the Quality Manual of the higher education institution and must address the specifics of the organisation and implementation of studies, the provision of study materials and accessibility of learning resources, the protection of the rights of all participants, and the participation (involvement) of relevant stakeholders, material conditions and the provision of appropriate support and counselling services, the collection and analysis of feedback and other relevant information (potential major perceived differences between students' experiences, potential challenges and how to address them, the removal of barriers, the ongoing monitoring of students' progress and engagement). The higher education institution should treat the feedback received on an equal footing and ensure that the quality loop is closed; a comprehensive assessment of the study is important.

In order to protect the rights of stakeholders, in accordance with Standard 7 of Article 12 of the Accreditation Criteria and Article 10 of the Criteria for Higher Vocational Colleges, it is necessary to focus on the specificities related to hybrid learning before enrolment (e.g. the required pre-existing ICT equipment and skills for successful participation, the timetable, the mode of implementation), during and at the end of learning (conditions for taking examinations, the method of assessment, the accessibility of the higher institution teaching staff and associates). Another important element is the responsible use of the online environment – protecting personal data and respecting the values of academic integrity.

*Klemen Šubic, Nataša Kramar, Gregor Rebernik, Filip Draženović*







n · a · k · v · i · s

Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije  
za kakovost v visokem šolstvu

s · q · a · a

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education



**Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education**

Miklošičeva cesta 7, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

T: +386 1 400 5771

E: [info@nakvis.si](mailto:info@nakvis.si)



NAKVIS is a full member of the following European  
and other international associations:







n·a·k·v·i·s

Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije  
za kakovost v visokem šolstvu

s·q·a·a

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education



Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (NAKVIS) was established in 2010 for accreditations and external evaluations in higher education and higher vocational education, as well as for development in this field. It operates responsibly, professionally, impartially and independently in line with European and global trends. Through membership in international associations, it strengthens its reputation and ensures comparability and international visibility of the Slovenian higher education area. It is committed to continuously improving quality, including cooperation with and counselling to all stakeholders in tertiary education.