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Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education



ANNUAL REPORT 2023

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT OF THE AGENCY

MICRO-CREDENTIALS



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**ANNUAL
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**EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT
OF THE AGENCY**
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MICRO-CREDENTIALS

I.**7 ABOUT THE AGENCY**

- 8 Agency's Departments
- 10 Agency Council
- 11 The Appeal Committee

II.**13 OVERVIEW OF THE AGENCY'S WORK IN 2023**

- 15 Importance of Cooperation
- 16 Legislation and other Provisions from the Field of Quality
- 17 Documents relating to the Agency's Operations
- 17 Analyses, Documents, Publications
- 19 Manuals, Guides
- 19 International Cooperation
- 20 Information System of the Agency (eNakvis and iNakvis)
- 22 Communication
- 23 Organisation and Participation in Events

III.**27 ENQA TARGETED REVIEW: SLOVENIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (SQAA)****28 EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT OF THE AGENCY****30 III.1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY****32 III.2 INTRODUCTION****32 BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW and outline of the Review process**

32 Background of the Review

33 Scope of the Review

33 Main Findings of the 2018 Review

35 Review process

36 Self-assessment Report

36 Site Visit

38 CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

38 Higher Education and Quality Assurance System

39 SQAA'S Organisation/Structure

39 SQAA'S Funding

40 SQAA'S Functions, activities, procedures

42 III.3 FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF SQAA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW**42 ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES**

42 ESG 3.4 Thematic Analysis

45 ESG 3.6 Internal Quality Assurance and Professional Conduct

48	ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE
48	ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal Quality Assurance
51	ESG 2.2 Designing Methodologies for for Purpose
52	ESG 2.3 Implementing Processes
53	ESG 2.4 Peer-Review Experts
55	ESG 2.5 Criteria for Outcomes
56	ESG 2.6 Reporting
58	ESG 2.7 Complaints and Appeals
60	III.4 ENHANCEMENT AREAS
60	ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE
60	Organisational Independence
61	Operational Independence
61	Overall
63	III.5 CONCLUSION
63	Summary of Commendations
64	Overview of Judgements and Recommendations
65	Suggestions for further improvement
66	III.6 ANNEXES
66	ANNEX 1: Programme of the Site Visit
71	ANNEX 2: Terms of Reference of the Review
75	ANNEX 3: Documents to Support the Review

	IV.
77	QUALITY ASSURANCE OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS: THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES
77	Introduction
78	Quality Assurance Frameworks
80	The Role of Quality Assurance Agencies
81	Conclusion
	V.
83	MICRO-CREDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT IN OECD COUNTRIES: KEY FINDINGS FROM THE MICRO-CREDENTIAL IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT
	VI.
91	DESIGNING A QA MODEL FOR MICRO-CREDENTIALS
92	The Formal Inclusion of Micro-credentials in Slovenian Higher Education Area
92	The Common Understanding of Micro-credentials
93	Conference Insights: the Progress, Issues and Vision of Micro-credentials
94	Establishing a Robust and Flexible Quality Assurance Framework
94	National Context and Challenges
95	Internal and External Quality Assurance
96	The Importance of Continuous Collaboration
97	Balancing Regulation and Flexibility



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ANNUAL REPORT 2023

ABOUT THE AGENCY

The Republic of Slovenia established the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter: the Agency) in 2010 as a public body for quality assurance in higher education and for development and advisory work. The Agency is a direct non-governmental budget user. Acting under public authority, it issues general acts for the exercise of public authorities and individual administrative acts. In carrying out its work, the Agency is independent and autonomous and committed to the principles of professionalism, impartiality, legality and political neutrality. The Agency is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR: <https://www.eqar.eu/>), the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA), the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), the presidency of which it assumed in 2020, and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Its membership in international associations for quality assurance in higher education proves the compliance of its operation with European standards and guidelines.

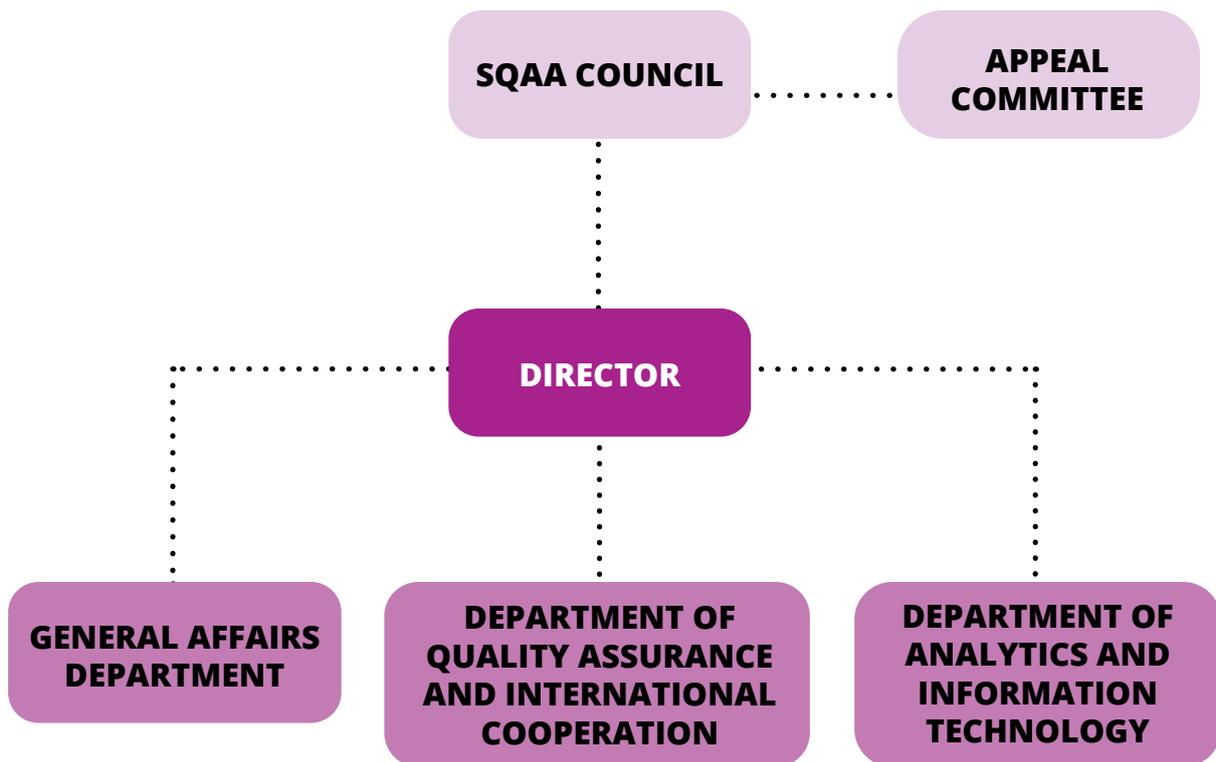
Mission

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 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.

Organisational structure of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education



THE AGENCY'S DEPARTMENTS

The AGENCY'S DEPARTMENTS perform tasks in the basic areas of the Agency's operation – 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 Appeal 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); practice showed, however, that it would be sensible to reorganise the departments in order to ensure better cohesion of content in individual fields of work. Since 2022, the Agency therefore has three departments – 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.

In April 2023, the Director of the Agency was re-elected for a five-year term. The members of the Appeal Committee and the Agency Council remained unchanged, and the trade union representatives still did not nominate a representative on the Council.

Table 1: Overview of tasks related to the external quality assessment of higher and higher vocational education by departments:

Director: Franci Demšar, Ph.D, alternate Jožica Kramar

Quality Assurance and International Cooperation Department

Head of the department: Klemen Šubic, Deputy heads: Nataša Kramar and Gregor Rebernik.

Staff: Filip Draženović, Anita Kajtezović, Martina Mravlja, Maruša Trobec and Julija Uršič

Fields of work:

- 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, transnational higher education – THE, etc.);
- project 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

Head of the department: Maja Milas, Deputy heads: Tatjana Debevec and Andrej Krček

Staff: Matjaž Štuhec, Ph. D., Tatjana Horvat and Tilen Heco

Fields of work:

- plans and reports (annual work plan and report on the work and operations 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, THE, etc.);

General Affairs Department

Head of the department: Barbara Zupančič Kočar, Deputy heads: Mateja Bajuk Malešič and Snežana Mačar.

Staff: Slađana Tomić, Prudencija Perat and Zala Sečnik

Fields of work:

- 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.

10 | THE AGENCY COUNCIL

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 a 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 delivery of study programmes.

Table 2: Council members in 2023

MEMBERS	Institution appointing the member:
Boris Dular, Ph.D., President of the Council	Representative employer associations
Marjan Mernik, Ph.D., Agency Council Deputy President	Rectors' conference
Goran Turk, Ph.D.	Rectors' conference
Klemen Širok, Ph.D.	Rectors' conference
Sebastjan Kristovič, Ph.D.	Representative association of independent higher education institutions
Branko Škafar, Ph.D.	Representative association of higher vocational colleges
David Bohar	Representative organisation of students in cooperation with student councils
Andrej Pirjevec	Representative organisation of students in cooperation with student councils
/	Representative trade unions in higher education
Julijana Kristl, Ph.D.	Government of the Republic of Slovenia
Peter Verovšek, Ph.D.	Government of the Republic of Slovenia



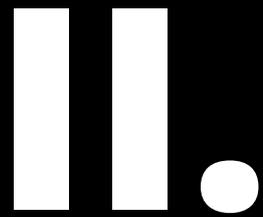
THE APPEAL COMMITTEE

The APPEAL COMMITTEE is a second-instance body deciding on appeals against decisions adopted by the Agency Council in the procedures for accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes.

The Appeal Committee is appointed by the Agency Council on the basis of a public invitation. The Appeal Committee consists of three members, each of whom has an alternate. The members elect from among themselves a chair and deputy chair. Alternates replace members in decision-making procedures in the event of their absence or exclusion.

Table 3: *Appeal Committee members in 2023*

Members	Term of office	Alternate
Uršula Habe Nagode, President	20 June 2023 to 19 June 2027	Robert Marolt, M.Sc.
Marko Novak, Ph.D., Member, Deputy President	20 June 2023 to 19 June 2027	Tina Tratnik
Andreja Rakuša, Member	20 June 2023 to 19 June 2027	Katarina Vatovec, Ph.D.



ANNUAL REPORT 2023

REVIEW 2023

Maja Milas

AN OVERVIEW OF THE AGENCY'S WORK IN 2023

In 2023, the Agency continued implementing its development strategy for the 2021-2025 period following its key priority areas, in particular the desire to adopt the Act on Quality in Higher and Higher Vocational Education, to improve assessment against quality standards and the accreditation and evaluation procedures, to deepen its analytical work, to establish up-to-date databases on selected activities, to take into account the orientations of sustainable development, to actively cooperate internationally and to communicate proactively.

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.

Table 4: Areas of quality assessment according to the types of accreditations or external evaluations

<p>INITIAL ACCREDITATION OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Operation of the higher education institution 2. Human resources 3. Material conditions 	<p>REACCREDITATION OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION AND EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF A HIGHER PROFESSIONAL COLLEGE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 delivery of study programmes
<p>ACCREDITATION OF A STUDY PROGRAMME</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Structure and content of a study programme 2. Study programme delivery concept 	<p>EVALUATION OF A STUDY PROGRAMME OR A SAMPLE OF STUDY PROGRAMME</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internal quality assurance and improvement of the quality of a study programme 2. Modification and updating of a study programme 3. Study programme delivery

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, with the mandatory presence of a foreign expert and a student. These groups carry out in-depth assessments of compliance with quality standards in all relevant areas.

The Agency regularly trains experts and potential candidates at specialised meetings and workshops, informing them about the Agency's legislative and regulatory developments and international standards for quality assessment. It also stresses the need for impartial and in-depth substantive quality assessments and for information on the characteristics of and satisfaction with external assessments. It familiarises professionals with the protocol for visiting HEIs and colleges and stresses the importance of meeting other key conditions for participation, such as the ability to work in a team and a respectful attitude towards interlocutors.

The findings of the group of experts are transparently reflected in 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 strongly linked to the active participation of students, teachers and researchers. The Agency and its predecessor, the Council for Higher Education, were among the first in Europe and beyond to actively involve 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 Agency's main task is to contribute to a high standard of education in 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. The tasks in the Agency's Annual Work Plan (AWP 2023) 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 and Higher Vocational 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.

Over the past year, the Agency has actively organised a number of thematic and coordination meetings and events, which have provided an important meeting point for the exchange of ideas and experiences. Its work is based on fundamental principles, opinions and processes developed in collaboration with a wide range of colleagues and stakeholders in the Slovenian higher education and higher vocational education area.

The Agency is working to build links with different stakeholders, enabling it to design and improve its accreditation and evaluation processes. By focusing on a

collaborative approach, the Agency aims to build quality relationships that form the basis for the development and progress of the Slovenian higher education and higher vocational education system. Self-evaluation is also an important aspect of the Agency's work. The Agency sees its mission as a tool to analyse its own progress, following European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) as a key part of this process.

LEGISLATION AND OTHER PROVISIONS FROM THE FIELD OF QUALITY

The draft Act on Quality in Higher and Higher Vocational Education (Quality Act), with its objectives and rationale, international comparisons and explanations of the individual articles, as prepared by the Agency in 2022, is still pending consideration by the competent Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation and other stakeholders in higher and higher vocational education. Activities related to the Act were halted in spring 2022 due to the change of government, and the new government has given priority to the overhaul of the Higher Education Act (ZViS).

The Ministry of Higher Education invited all relevant and credible stakeholders to participate in the overhaul process, and appointed a special inter-ministerial working group, which, in addition to representatives of the ministry, includes representatives of the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Slovenia, independent higher education institutions, the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Coordination of Independent Research Institutes of Slovenia, trade unions, the Student Organisation of Slovenia, the Slovenian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Agency.

Most of the Agency's legislative work in 2023 was therefore devoted to the overhaul of the ZViS, in the context of which it also made proposals to improve the provisions on quality assessment, accreditation and evaluation procedures together with appeals, to regulate the possibility for the Agency to participate in foreign accreditation procedures, etc.; at the same time, it argued for the need for a separate Quality Act, which it continued to actively pursue.

The work of the ZViS overhaul group was intensive and continued throughout the year, with the group meeting on a fortnightly basis. Detailed starting points for the new Act have been developed, with the first version expected to be finalised at the end of January 2024, when the working group will continue its work.

DOCUMENTS RELATING TO THE AGENCY'S OPERATIONS

In the area of the Agency's operations, two new sets of rules were adopted in 2023 and one was amended. The Act amending the Working Time Rules was adopted in July 2023. New sections on "Recording attendance and absences" and "Authorisation of absences" were added, and the authorisation for travel on duty in the event of a travel order not being issued has been amended.

Furthermore, new Contracting Rules were adopted in the summer of 2023, which sets out the rules and procedure for the conclusion of all types of contracts within the Agency and for the conclusion of copyright contracts for experts in the Agency's accreditation and evaluation procedures. In November 2023, the Payment Card Rules were adopted, which regulate the use of payment cards issued to the Agency.

ANALYSES, DOCUMENTS, PUBLICATIONS

A guide to external assessments of higher education institutions, study programmes and higher vocational colleges in accreditation and evaluation procedures was published in English in January. It is designed to help make assessments at a deeper, higher quality level, both in terms of content and expertise, and to guide the work of the Agency's experts and other stakeholders.

In addition to the Agency's systemic and thematic analyses, the text was informed by the Agency's ongoing consideration of the comments of the participants in the procedures, as well as by the findings and recommendations of the participants in the consultations with experts, higher and higher vocational education teachers, scientists in the field of higher education didactics and science research, and representatives of other stakeholders.

The Guide is intended not only for the Agency experts or expert candidates, but also for 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.

Employees continued to analyse the content of the reports by groups of experts resulting from the evaluations of samples, this time in the area of teacher training study programmes. The third systemic analysis of accreditation and evaluation practices covering accreditation and evaluation reports by groups of experts and self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges from 2018 to 2022 was initiated. To this end, more than 200 reports need to be analysed, most of them related to the assessment of study programmes in accreditation and evaluation procedures, for which the first results and data have been collected.

In 2023, the Agency prepared a thematic analysis on the quality of a sample of teacher training study programmes. Thematic analyses are characterised by going deeper into the relevance of expert assessments according to the prescribed areas of assessment and quality standards for the evaluation of study programmes than systemic analyses. In summarising, interpreting and analysing the content of the formal evaluation reports of the groups



of experts, the Agency has drawn on the Methodology and Procedure for the Preparation and Dissemination of Systemic and Thematic Analyses and, in particular, the Guide to External Assessments.

The Agency's main guiding principles for analysing the experts' reports were qualitative messages on the quality of studies and their underlying conditions in the selected areas; the experts' conclusions, justifications and assessments of why the studies under review are good or not good, especially in terms of study content, changes, self-evaluation and implementation, such as teaching methods and formats, the facilitation of quality teaching practice and research by students, and the quality of higher education teachers. It was based on the guidelines for assessing this topic in the Guide.

In autumn 2023, the Agency's annual publication was published, which – in addition to presenting the Agency and the annual report on its work – aimed to present the Agency's self-evaluation report and the Rules on conditions for providing library public service, prepared by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia. The publication was printed in both the Slovenian and English language, and its content was presented at national and international events. 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 delivered 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. A comprehensive database of higher education libraries has also been launched. To this end, an online consultation was organised in the spring to present in more detail the Rules on conditions for providing library public service.

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 has established links with CEENQA and individual European agencies to strengthen the analytics field and share good practice in the field of independence.

MANUALS, GUIDES

An English version of the guide to external assessments has been produced and is available in a book edition. The guide discusses the structural features of external assessments and the discrepancies or shifts that occur in assessments. It details the specifics and important inadequacies of external assessments according to each quality standard and type of procedure, and provides guidance on how to carry out a proper assessment in all the areas covered by the Criteria.

Particular attention is paid to assessing the quality of scientific and research, professional or artistic work, teaching, practical training and the content and delivery of studies. The specifics of the cycles and types of study, its correspondence to the discipline and some institutional specifics are highlighted in order to make the assessment of quality more in-depth, substantive, multifaceted and rigorous.

Meetings, presentations and a consultation were organised to present the guide, including in the context of international events (e.g. presentation of the guide at CEENQA working meetings).

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The Agency's international cooperation includes active participation in the international associations of quality agencies of which NAKVIS is a full member (ENQA, ECA, CEENQA, EQAR and INQAHEE).

In 2023, the Agency continued its regular participation in the CEENQA network based on the joint organisation of thematic events, the preparation of publications on various topics, etc. Within the network, chaired by the Agency Director, it participated in regular bi-monthly remote working meetings of the agencies.

The Agency continued with study visits to foreign agencies such as the Finnish Education and Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), the Spanish Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya) and the Serbian Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NAT).

The working visits were mainly aimed at strengthening cooperation in the European area, identifying common challenges faced by agencies, finding appropriate solutions and exchanging examples of good practice.

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.

In June 2021, the Agency also joined the ENQA working group for drafting guidelines on academic integrity for both higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. In an era of digital advances and the introduction of technological models of education into the study process, we see a significant increase in the risks to ensuring academic integrity in Europe and beyond. As an ambassador of academic integrity in Slovenian higher education, NAKVIS draws attention to the pitfalls and challenges in the area of respecting the values of academic integrity and ethical behaviour of the entire academic community.



Representatives of the Agency also attended ENQA umbrella events, namely the ENQA Member Forum, which took place in April, where the Agency's representatives presented the field of computerisation of quality assurance processes, and the EQAF Forum, which took place in November.

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 2023, in addition to its participation in the CEENQA, ECA and ENQA networks, the Agency continued to participate in the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BUFG). It regularly cooperates with EQAR to share and publish up-to-date data on accredited higher education institutions and study programmes (DEQAR information database). Membership of INQAHEE gives the Agency insight into practices and developments in higher education innovation beyond the European Higher Education Area.

INFORMATION SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY (eNAKVIS AND iNAKVIS)

In 2023, the Agency successfully implemented eNakvis 2.0 in the production environment. Since May, it has allowed institutions to communicate changes to their study programmes via a new online portal. To ensure the smooth use of the revamped IT system, the Agency carried out extensive training and education, which ran until the end of the year. Since March, the Agency

has been working intensively on the integration of the ministry's and universities' external IT systems with eNakvis. At the end of 2023, it has successfully completed the transfer of data from the two universities to eNakvis and then successfully transferred this data from eNakvis to the eVŠ (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation).



The Agency continued to develop modules in its internal IT system iNakvis to support work processes of the employees. The analysis module has been upgraded with data on study programmes, procedures and experts.

An internal notification system via in-app notifications has been launched and the user interface has been redesigned so that employees now have relevant and personalised information available to them from the front page. A module has been added to allow staff to upload pre-populated document templates for accreditation and evaluation procedures. Documents such as accreditation decisions, decisions on the appointment of experts, application reports and progress report letters can be downloaded by users in the iNakvis application. The downloaded document already contains all the information about the procedure that conducted in the app.

The development of support for the Agency's Council meetings has also been important. Agenda creation for Agency Council meetings has been done via iNakvis since this year. Lastly, the record of changes to study programmes has been implemented.

Higher education institutions inform NAKVIS of changes to their study programmes via the external eNakvis system, and the Agency informs the competent Ministry after reviewing the changes. The new electronic records in iNakvis supports the review of changes within the Agency. Our efforts in the Agency's computerisation were also recognised by the members of the European Association of Quality Agencies in Higher Education (ENQA) Expert Group, who commended the development of the internal IT system iNakvis in their report.

COMMUNICATION

In recent years, the Agency 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 (X and YouTube) and electronic communication (e-newsletter). The Agency keeps up-to-date and communicates all events, news and important announcements on its website and social media.

As part of its promotional activities, the Agency has continued its project of making presentation films in 2023, this time focusing on higher vocational colleges. The videos are aimed at prospective students, directing them to the NAKVIS website for useful information about the Slovenian higher education landscape and enrolment itself. The aim remains for the NAKVIS website to become a common information portal for all students and prospective students, providing accurate, up-to-date and relevant information on studying in Slovenia, its quality and achievements. The Agency's promotional activities in the field of video content were further strengthened by the production of animated films, where the Agency presents its key activities, procedures and general educational topics in the field of quality assurance in Slovenian and English, aimed at both our stakeholders and the general public.

The Agency was assessed by ENQA experts in 2023 and demonstrated full compliance with European quality standards. To this end, prior to the visit itself, it organised meetings with the Agency's key stakeholders to disseminate the results of the Agency's self-evaluation, where it also briefed those present on the content and purpose of the external assessment. The Agency also organises coordination meetings with all relevant stakeholders – both domestic and foreign – to deepen cooperation, and meets with some of them on a regular monthly basis. The Agency regularly organises consultations for national and international guests, the theme of the international conference in 2023 was "Designing a Quality Assurance System for Micro-Credentials". The Agency also places emphasis on internal communication, which is mainly carried out within the internal information system iNakvis, which is constantly being upgraded and adapted to the communication needs of the employees and the Agency in general.

The Agency is also committed to consistently safeguarding the integrity, independence and professionalism of our processes, and in 2023 a Communications Protocol was developed to define the channels of communication and the responsibilities of stakeholders in the Agency's processes, as well as how to deal with undue pressure.





ORGANISATION AND PARTICIPATION IN EVENTS

In 2023, the Agency organised a range of events and meetings, with a focus on strengthening cooperation with different higher education stakeholders both at home and abroad. The Agency has actively organised thematic meetings, hosted various representatives of other agencies and participated in a number of important events, both at home and internationally. Efforts have been focused on building and consolidating links and cooperation with diverse stakeholders, which is a key element of the strategy for further quality work and interaction.

It also continued the training of candidates for Agency experts, covering the regulations used by experts in their work, how to work as part of a group of experts, lessons learned from assessments, and the use of the Assessment Guide. 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.

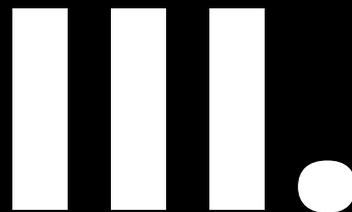
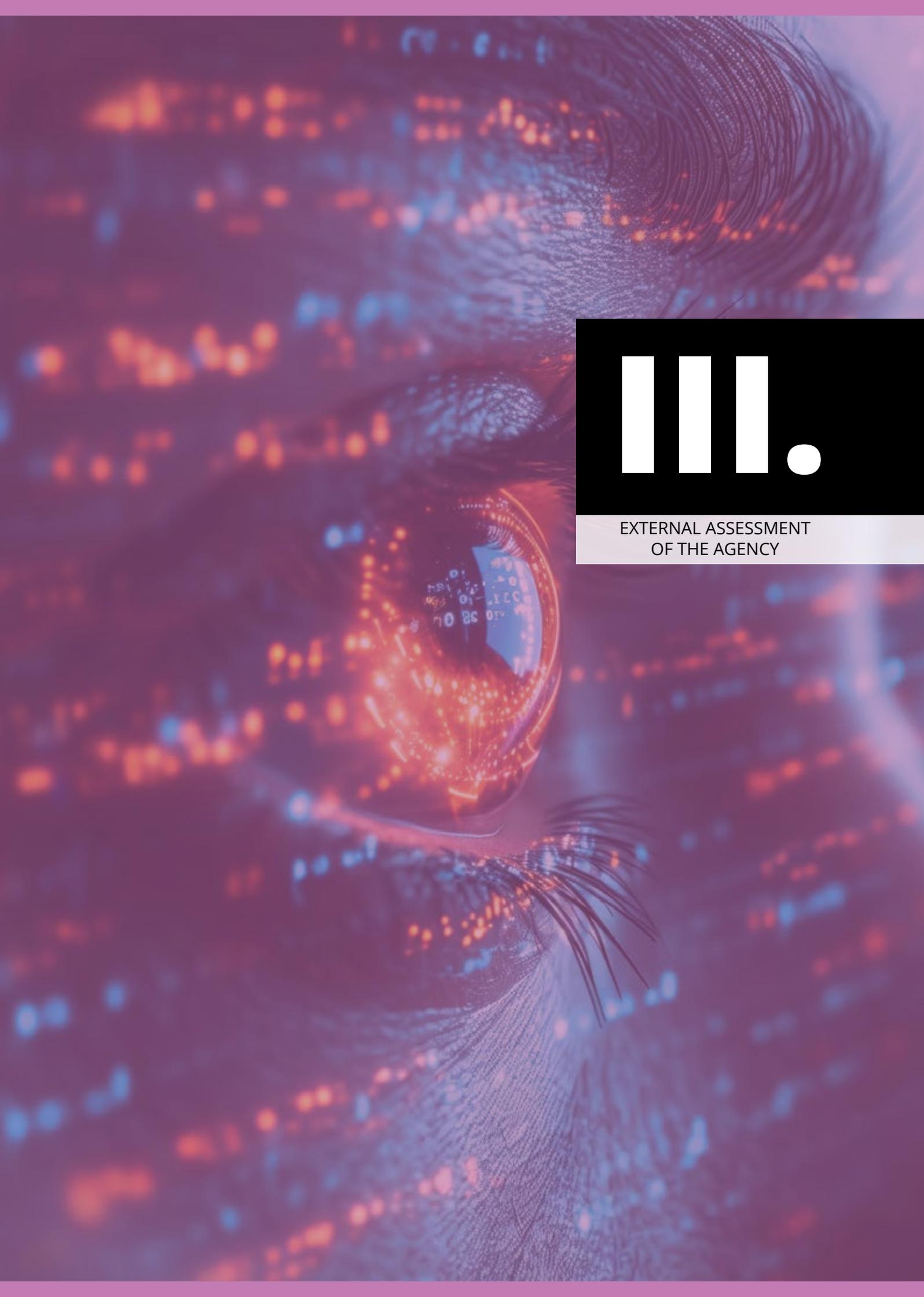
At the spring consultation on quality assurance, the new Rules on conditions for providing library public service, prepared by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, were presented. The document redefines the conditions for the provision of the public library service – including higher education libraries – and thus also influences the work of the experts in the NAKVIS assessments.

In November 2023, the Agency organised an international web consultation on quality assurance on the topic of micro-credentials. The purpose of the consultation, which brought together a wide range of international and national experts in the field of micro-credentials, was to exchange experiences and transferable practices in this topical area and to discuss the challenges that arise in this context.

Table 5: Events held and participation in various meetings in 2023

<p>Presentation of the NAKVIS Guide to External Assessments (18 January 2023)</p>	<p>On 18 January 2023, NAKVIS and the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU) organised an event entitled Presentation of the NAKVIS Guide to External Assessments at SAZU. The event was opened with speeches by Dr Franci Demšar, Director of NAKVIS, and Dr Peter Štih, President of SAZU, and the guide was presented by Tatjana Debevec from NAKVIS. The presentation was attended by a number of distinguished guests from the Slovenian higher education area, including the rectors of all major Slovenian universities, as well as representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, the Union of Independent Higher Education Institutions, and the Association of Slovene Higher Vocational Colleges.</p>
<p>Visit by a representative from the Moldovan agency (24 and 26 January 2023)</p>	<p>From 24 to 26 January, a representative of the Moldovan quality agency ANACEC visited the Agency in the framework of an exchange of agency staff (IMINQA project). NAKVIS employees presented to their Moldovan counterpart the organisation of their work at the Agency, the process of transition to institutional assessment and the revised procedures, the digitisation process of the Agency, the self-evaluation process and the preparation for the assessment by the European organisation ENQA. Particular emphasis was placed on sharing good practices that will help the Moldovan agency in its ongoing overhaul of its quality assurance system. At the end of the visit, the two agencies also signed an agreement on further cooperation, which will serve as a basis for joint projects in the future.</p>
<p>Visit by a representative of the EUA (2 and 3 February 2023)</p>	<p>At the beginning of February, a representative of the European University Association (EUA) visited the Agency as part of an exchange of agency staff (IMINQA project). The focus of the visit was on the European approach to quality assurance of joint degree programmes, the digitalisation of the Agency and current trends in the European Higher Education Area (micro-credentials, European networks of universities). Discussions were also held with a view to future cooperation, and an agreement was reached on a visit by the EUA in the current year.</p>
<p>VISIT OF THE REPRESENTATIVES OF AZVO REGARDING THE DIGITISATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES (7 February 2023)</p>	<p>The visit by representatives of the Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (AZVO) focused on the digitisation of quality assurance processes in higher education. The representatives of NAKVIS gave a detailed presentation on the operation of the two IT systems: eNakvis and iNakvis, and shared their experience in the implementation of the above-mentioned projects, as AZVO is in the process of preparing the tender documents for the construction of their IT process, which will also seek to digitise the procedures carried out at the Agency. Finally, we would like to thank our guests for devoting some time to the structure and collection of the data they manage, as this information will be very useful for the further development of both NAKVIS systems.</p>
<p>ENQA expert panel visit in the context of external assessment of NAKVIS (22–24 March 2023)</p>	<p>A panel of ENQA experts visited the Agency from 22 to 24 March 2023. At the end of the visit, the expert panel presented its final findings on the Agency's work over the last five years, which show that the Agency meets European quality standards and is making significant progress in its work. The Expert Panel will produce its report in May and a formal decision on the renewal of ENQA membership and entry in the European Quality Assurance of Higher Education (EQAR) register is expected in the autumn.</p>
<p>ECA Member Forum in The Hague (27–29 March 2023)</p>	<p>The ECA organised a forum for ECA members, which included presentations on the University of Twente and their participation in the European Universities Initiative, the YUFE Student Journey certificate and the European Degree label initiative. The forum was followed by a two-day training session on communication in an intercultural environment, which was attended by an agency employee.</p>
<p>iNakvis presentation at the ENQA Members' Forum in Georgia (20 and 21 April 2023)</p>	<p>The ENQA Members' Forum took place in Tbilisi, Georgia, on 20 and 21 April, where current policies and practices in the field of quality assurance were presented. The event was also attended by two representatives of NAKVIS, who, at the invitation of the organisers, hosted a meeting entitled Digital transformation and enhancement of QA procedures. A key focus of the lecture was on the development of the Agency's internal IT system iNakvis, which aims to improve the efficiency of the Agency's work, leverage data for analytics and support communication with stakeholders.</p>
<p>ECA Member Seminar and General Assembly Meeting in Mallorca (21–23 June 2023)</p>	<p>To celebrate the 20th anniversary of the ECA, a two-day members' seminar was organised in Palma de Mallorca with key speakers who have contributed to the development of the ECA throughout its history. The workshops were organised mainly to mobilise the membership and identify the key strategic orientations of the ECA. The event was attended by an Agency employee.</p>
<p>Thematic meeting of CEENQA members (25 July 2023)</p>	<p>Representatives of CEENQA members, chaired by NAKVIS Director Dr Franci Demšar, gathered in July for the 17th joint virtual meeting. The meetings are held every other month, with the aim of bringing together members to present good practices, thematic analyses, projects and other topics of interest. The July meeting was dedicated to presenting the work and progress of the Estonian agency SKVC, the work and progress of the Czech agency NAB and the presentation of the NAKVIS Guide to External Assessments.</p>

Visit to Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir, Turkey	<p>The Agency Director visited Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir, Turkey. There he met with the Rector of the University, Professor Dr Nühket Hotar, and delivered a lecture on International Higher Education and the Role of Quality Assurance: Example of NAKVIS. He also visited some of the university's member faculties, namely the Faculty of Economics, the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Postgraduate Studies in the Arts. The discussion between the Director of NAKVIS and the representatives of the local institutions was mainly focused on deepening cooperation with Slovenian universities and the possibility of external accreditation of Dokuz Eylül University by NAKVIS in the event of the adoption of Slovenian legislation that would allow this.</p>
Visit by a representative of the Serbian Agency – NAT (8–12 May 2023)	<p>The visit of the representative of the Serbian agency provided valuable experience which is important for understanding the core values of each quality assurance agency: independence, professionalism, the ability to self-reflect and analyse their work, transparency and room for development. The visit provided an excellent opportunity for knowledge sharing and cooperation, which has strengthened our long-standing partnership.</p>
NAKVIS consultation: Presentation of the new Rules on conditions for providing library public service (13 June 2023)	<p>At the June consultation on quality assurance, the new Rules on conditions for providing library public service, prepared by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, were presented. The document redefines the conditions for the provision of the public library service – including higher education libraries – and thus also influences the work of the experts in the NAKVIS assessments. To watch a video of the whole event, click below.</p>
CEENQA General Assembly (2 and 3 June 2023)	<p>The CEENQA General Assembly took place this year on 2 and 3 June in Astana, Kazakhstan. The event was hosted by the Kazakhstan agency, IAAR. On the margins of the assembly, a workshop on “People and Culture in Quality Assurance Agencies” was held, focusing on issues related to human resources management and staff development. The event was marked by a discussion on current issues in the field of quality assurance in higher education, but it was also an opportunity to exchange good practices between the participating agencies.</p>
Visit by a representative of the Bulgarian agency (NEAA) (25 – 26 October 2023)	<p>At the beginning of October, two representatives of the Bulgarian agency NEAA visited the Agency as part of an exchange of agency staff (IMINQA project). The focus of the visit was on the digitisation of the Agency, the involvement of stakeholders in the work of the Agency, the implementation of online visits, self-evaluation and the use of standards.</p>
NAKVIS Consultation: Designing a quality assurance system for micro-credentials (6 November 2023)	<p>The theme of this year's Quality Assurance Webinar was “Designing a quality assurance system for micro-credentials”. The purpose of the consultation, which brought together a wide range of international and national experts in the field of micro-credentials, was to exchange experiences and transferable practices in this topical area and to discuss the challenges that arise in this context.</p>
EQAF 2023: Internationalisation in a Changing World (23 to 26 November 2023)	<p>Participation in the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) 2023 entitled “Internationalisation in a Changing World – New Trends and Challenges for Quality Assurance”, held this year in Aveiro, Portugal.</p>
ECA Winter Members' Forum in Paris (18–19 December 2023)	<p>Two employees attended the ECA Winter Members' Forum, which focused on discussions and workshops on quality assurance and internationalisation, cooperation between agencies in an international environment, and recruitment of international experts. The event concluded with a workshop and a discussion on the association's strategic objectives for 2030.</p>
Training of experts and candidates for entry in the register of experts	<p>As part of the training of the Agency's experts, a consultation on the Presentation of the new Rules on conditions for providing library public service was organised in June. Every year, the Agency issues a call for NAKVIS experts and organises comprehensive training for all eligible candidates, following a programme that was thoroughly updated in 2021. In the first part of the training, candidates are familiarised with the Agency's work, procedures, how to work in groups of experts and, after being divided into sub-groups, they work on (assess) a real application for the evaluation of a study programme or a higher vocational college. The first part of the training results in an evaluation report, which is assessed by the Quality Assurance Department and the International Cooperation Department staff, who respond to it with comments on the candidates' participation, organisation of the work, professionalism and the content of the findings. The second part of the training is designed to follow the Agency's current procedures, where candidates, as external observers, follow a real procedure. Their participation is assessed by the chair of the group of experts and the Agency staff member, and upon successful completion, the candidate is entered by the Agency Council in the NAKVIS register of experts.</p>



EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT
OF THE AGENCY

Alastair Delaney, Janja Komljenovic, Tatjana Volkova, Damir Solak
28 June 2023

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW: **SLOVENIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (SQAA)**

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT OF THE AGENCY

The Agency's performance is evaluated through external assessment procedures conducted by international associations that monitor the Agency's quality improvement procedures and processes in accordance with international standards. These associations include the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), and the European Consortium of Higher Education Agencies (ECA).

During external assessment processes, international associations assess the performance of agencies according to established international documents, notably the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). This ensures that quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area adhere to consistent principles and guidelines, and that their processes and procedures are designed to meet the intent and requirements of these international documents. The primary objective of external evaluations is to continuously enhance the work of the agency while ensuring independence and accountability towards higher education institutions.

The external audit of the Agency, which included the organization of the visit by the ENQA panel group, was one of the key tasks successfully completed in 2023. We take pride in the excellent report provided by the panel, which demonstrates the alignment of the agency's work with the ESG. Based on this favorable assessment, we have renewed our membership of ENQA and EQAR for another 5 years.

Below, we present the report of the ENQA panel group.

III.

27	ENQA TARGETED REVIEW: SLOVENIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (SQAA)	48	ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE
28	EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT OF THE AGENCY	48	ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal Quality Assurance
30	III.1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	51	ESG 2.2 Designing Methodologies for for Purpose
32	III.2 INTRODUCTION	52	ESG 2.3 Implementing Processes
32	BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW and outline of the review process	53	ESG 2.4 Peer-Review Experts
32	Background of the review	55	ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes
33	Scope of the review	56	ESG 2.6 Reporting
33	Main findings of the 2018 review	58	ESG 2.7 Complaints and Appeals
35	Review process	60	III.4 ENHANCEMENT AREAS
36	Self-assessment report	60	ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE
36	Site visit	60	Organisational independence
38	CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY	61	Operational independence
38	Higher Education and Quality assurance system	61	Overall
39	SQAA'S Organisation/Structure	63	III.5 CONCLUSION
39	SQAA'S Funding	63	Summary of Commendations
40	SQAA'S Functions, activities, procedures	64	Overview of Judgements and Recommendations
42	III.3 FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF SQAA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW	65	Suggestions for further improvement
42	ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES	66	III.6 ANNEXES
42	ESG 3.4 Thematic Analysis	66	ANNEX 1: Programme of the Site visit
45	ESG 3.6 Internal Quality assurance and Professional Conduct	71	ANNEX 2: Terms of reference of the Review
		75	ANNEX 3: Documents to support the Review

III.1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the analysis and conclusions of the ENQA review of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) Part 2 and 3 (as relevant following the agreed Terms of Reference). The report is based on an ENQA targeted peer review, following the methodology described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews and considering the Use and Interpretation of the ESG by the EQAR's Register Committee. In addition to the agency and its stakeholders, the report is meant to provide information for the ENQA Board's decision on SQAA's renewal of membership and to EQAR to support the agency's reapplication to the register.

The review took place from July 2022 to December 2023, with the in-person site visit on 22nd – 24th March 2023.

SQAA is a national-level QA agency. It conducts evaluation and accreditation of higher education (HE) study programmes and institutions that are a requirement for institutions to operate within Slovenia. In addition, it conducts the evaluation of vocational colleges. Furthermore, it strives to enhance the HE system's quality by engaging with HE stakeholders, conducting various studies to support the sector, and cooperating with agencies abroad.

This report addresses the ESG standards where SQAA was judged as partially compliant by the EQAR Register Committee during the previous full review, namely ESGs 2.6 (Reporting), 3.4 (Thematic analysis) and 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct).

In addition, this report addresses standards of Part 2 of the ESG for the external (sample) evaluation of a study programme. This is an activity that the SQAA implemented since the last full review against the ESG in 2018.

This report also addresses ESG 2.1 (Consideration of internal quality assurance) for the enhancement purposes of the agency, following the aims and objectives of the targeted review.



Finally, the review panel has addressed the agency's self-selected enhancement area ESG 3.3 (Independence).

The panel judged the agency's compliance with the ESG as listed in the table below:

Table 1. Summary of agency's compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3)

ESG	Compliance according to the targeted review ¹	Compliance according to the targeted review ²
2.1.	Compliant	N/A
2.2.	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant » Compliant
2.3.	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant » Compliant
2.4.	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant » Compliant
2.5.	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant » Compliant
2.6.	Compliant	N/A
2.7.	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant » Compliant
3.1.	N/A	Compliant » Compliant
3.3.	N/A	Compliant » Compliant
3.3.	N/A	Compliant » Compliant
3.4.	Compliant	N/A
3.5.	N/A	Compliant » Compliant
3.6.	Compliant	N/A

The agency chose to focus on independence as its enhancement area. Full details are provided in the relevant section of this report. The agency was justly proud of its independence, especially in comparison to other similar agencies in the region. To enhance the public perception of its independence and integrity, SQAA has taken a number of measures since 2018. These had been effective and were supported by all stakeholders. Stakeholders were supportive of efforts the agency might make to extend its international experts beyond the region, and to refine its use of data to reduce the regulatory burden.

Overall, the panel visited an agency that had responded very positively to the previous agency report. The agency had taken a number of steps to improve both areas that had been highlighted in the previous report, and more generally. The agency had improved significantly since 2018, and there was an evident culture of continuous improvement that gave the panel confidence that the agency would continue to improve in the future.

¹ Compliance refers to the focus areas that were evaluated in depth and are part of the Terms of Reference, i.e., standards that were only partially compliant with the ESG during the last full review, ESG Part 2 for newly introduced or changed QA activities of the agency, ESG 2.1 for all QA activities and any standard affected by substantive changes since the last full review. If any of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG are covered due to the newly introduced or changed QA activities, a remark "for new or changed QA activities only" is added in brackets to the compliance assessment.

² Compliance refers to the last EQAR Register Committee decision for renewal of inclusion on the Register, or in case when an agency is not renewing its registration in EQAR, compliance refers to the last ENQA Agency Review report and should its judgement differ from that of the panel, the judgement of the ENQA Board, as stipulated in the membership decision letter by the ENQA Board. Compliance refers to the QA activities of the agency that were reviewed during the previous full review.



III.2 INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of The Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency, SQAA (Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije za kakovost v visokem šolstvu, NAKVIS) with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted between July 2022 and December 2023 and should be read together with the external review report of the agency's last full review against the ESG.

This review report will be used for the renewal of SQAA's ENQA membership as well as SQAA's registration in EQAR.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review at least once every five years to verify that they comply with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on EQAR is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's ESG compliance. An external review is a prerequisite for registration.

SQAA has undergone two successful reviews against ESG Parts 2 and 3 (in 2014 and 2018), so it is eligible and has opted for a targeted review. The purpose of a targeted review is to ensure the agency's compliance with the ESG by covering standards that were found partially compliant during the agency's last renewal of registration in EQAR and on standards that could have been affected by substantive changes³ during the past five years while at the same time further strengthening the enhancement part of the review.

³ e.g. organisational changes, the launch of new external QA activities.

In the period between 2018 and 2023, SQAA has not submitted any substantive changes to EQAR.

This review, therefore, addresses standards of the ESG with which SQAA was found to be partially compliant in 2018, other possible changes to the external QA activities of the agency since the last review, and the enhancement area selected by SQAA.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

SQAA is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Accreditation of international joint programmes;
- Accreditation of new study programmes;
- Assessing the requirements for entry of transnational higher education (THE) to the SQAAREGISTER;
- External evaluation of vocational colleges;
- Extraordinary evaluation of higher education institutions;
- Extraordinary evaluation of study programmes;
- External (sample) evaluation of a study programme;
- Initial accreditation of higher education institutions;
- Reaccreditation of higher education institutions;
- Transformation of a higher education institution;
- Notifications of international joint programmes and programmes of the international associations of universities accredited abroad.

However, this targeted review is limited to an in-depth evaluation of:

- Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the EQAR Register Committee's last re-newal decision (ESG 2.6 – Reporting; ESG 3.4 – Thematic analysis; ESG 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct);
- Standards 2.1 to 2.7 of the ESG for the external (sample) evaluation of a study programme;
- ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;
- Self-selected enhancement area: ESG 3.3 Independence.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2018 REVIEW

SQAA was last assessed against the ESG in 2018. According to the EQAR Register Committee's decision, SQAA demonstrated compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3) as follows:

- ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance - Compliance
- ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose - Compliance
- ESG 2.3 Implementing processes - Compliance
- ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts - Compliance
- ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes - Compliance
- ESG 2.6 Reporting - Partial compliance
- ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals - Compliance
- ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance - Compliance
- ESG 3.2 Official status - Compliance
- ESG 3.3 Independence - Compliance
- ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis - Partial compliance
- ESG 3.5 Resources - Compliance

- ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct - Partial compliance
- ESG 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies - Compliance (by virtue of applying).

Concerning ESG 2.6, the EQAR Register Committee pointed out two main challenges. First, it concurred with the review panel, which found that SQAA's website was not updated regularly, which led to a significant number of reports or decisions not being published in a timely manner or being difficult to access.

The Register Committee noted that SQAA has since launched its new website, which addresses the issue according to SQAA's statement provided to EQAR following the submission of the review report. The Register Committee asked the next external review of SQAA (i.e., this targeted review) to analyse in detail whether the new website fully accounted for the shortcomings identified by the panel in 2018.

Second, the Register Committee further noted that reports from initial accredita-

tion procedures with a negative outcome were not published, which hindered full transparency.

Regarding ESG 3.4, the EQAR Register Committee noted that SQAA swiftly responded to the re-view panel's analysis and published a "methodology and procedure for drafting and disseminating system-wide and thematic analyses". However, the Register Committee asked that the actual implementation be analysed within the next external review of SQAA (i.e., this targeted review). Finally, in the context of ESG 3.6, the EQAR Register Committee stated that according to the 2018 review panel's report, SQAA has further systematised its internal QA system as required by the previous review in 2013.

However, the Committee also noted the review panel's critical appraisal of SQAA's interaction with the different stakeholders from different types of higher education institutions, and whether the agency had shared its quality policy with all stakeholders. The Committee, therefore, considered that the recommendation was partially addressed and concurred with the panel's conclusion of partial compliance.



The review panel would like to note that the transfer of compliance with the ESG standards from the 2018 review applies to all activities that have been covered in the earlier review. The panel checked to ensure that there were no material changes to the work of the agency relevant to any other standard.

In addition, the judgement on compliance for the standards of the ESG selected for evaluation in this targeted review has been made based on the evidence presented in 2023 and can differ following the agency's progress on the listed recommendations.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2023 external targeted review of SQAA was conducted in line with the process described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews, the EQAR Procedures for Applications, and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the targeted review of SQAA was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- **Alastair Delaney** (*Chair, ENQA nominee*), Executive Director of Operations and Deputy Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency, UK
- **Janja Komljenovic** (*Secretary, ENQA nominee*), Senior Lecturer, Lancaster University, UK
- **Tatjana Volkova** (*Panel member, EUA nominee*), Professor, BA School of Business and Finance, Latvia
- **Damir Solak** (*ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool*), Financial Law and Financial Sciences (Doctoral Degree Study Programme), Masaryk University, Faculty of Law, Czechia

Goran Dakovic, ENQA's Head of Agency Reviews, acted as the review coordinator for this review.

The review took place from July 2022 to December 2023. The review panel received the SAR in December 2022. At the first briefing meeting on 19 January 2023, EQAR director, Colin Tuck, briefed the panel on the terms of reference and EQAR's expectations about this targeted review, while the review coordinator informed the panel of the overall review methodology and procedure. The review panel had an initial debate about the SAR and other documents received. The second meeting of the review panel took place on 14 February 2023 to further discuss the documents received and their understanding of SQAA's practices.

The review panel met online with the agency contact person on 6 March 2023 to discuss the Slovenian HE system and the SQAA's operations. The review panel was in regular email contact between January and April 2023 to actively discuss panel members' findings, thoughts and impressions as they analysed the received material.

The review panel asked for additional information to be sent before the site visit. The information that the panel wanted to receive was identified after reading the SAR and all the other documents received (previous SAR, ENQA review report 2018, complaints against SQAA, SQAA follow-up report). The requested information included clarification on the volume and impact of SQAA's Director's visits to HEIs and QA agencies abroad, events that SQAA organised for HE stakeholders, examples of draft reports in English written by experts, examples of SQAA newsletters, and similar. The agency sent all requested information to the panel.

The site visit took place from 22nd to 24th March 2023 in person.

Following the visit, the draft review report was completed in April 2023 and sent to SQAA for the factual check in early May 2023. The final review report was submitted to the ENQA's Agency Re-views Committee in end May 2023.

The review panel would like to confirm that the arrangements by ENQA provided for a smooth and well-coordinated review process.

All the findings and conclusions included in this report are the joint opinion of the review panel and have been agreed on during the report drafting process.

Self-assessment report

SQAA's SAR was prepared as a basis for this targeted review coordinated by ENQA. The SAR's main objectives are said to be the improvement of the quality of the agency's activities and fulfilling the conditions for extending membership in ENQA and renewing registration in EQAR.

The SAR was prepared in 2022 and focused on the period between 2020 and 2022. The agency also attached the previous internal self-assessment report, which was published in 2020 and covered activities between 2018 and 2019.

The SAR was prepared by SQAA's self-assessment team of five employees and the SQAA's Council President. External stakeholders, including representatives of the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Slovenia, the Union of Independent Institutions of Higher Education, the Association of Slovene Higher Vocational Colleges and the Student Organisation of Slovenia, also contributed to the report.

The SAR is extensive and detailed. It consists of five chapters covering (i) the presentation of the agency and its activities, including changes since the last ENQA review, (ii) progress on the standards of the ESG where SQAA was partially compliant in 2018, (iii) selected quality improvement

areas, (iv) SWOT analysis and (v) future challenges and opportunities.

SQAA conducted several surveys, focus groups and other activities that were analysed and included in SAR. First, the staff survey reported on staff satisfaction and perception of their work. Second, the stakeholder survey asked stakeholders about their perception of SQAA's activities and procedures. Third, focus groups were organised with representatives of HEIs and vocational colleges to collect their views for the SWOT analysis. Finally, SQAA organises several formal and informal meetings and opportunities to collect stakeholders' feedback continuously that were reflected upon in the SAR as well.

The review panel found the SAR to be comprehensive and covering all activities of the agency. It did not focus only on the areas of the targeted review. In fact, the targeted review sections were only one chapter in the SAR. The review panel appreciated the broader description of the agency's operations.

Site visit

The site visit took place on 22nd– 24th March 2023 in person. The review schedule was agreed upon in advance by the review panel and SQAA.

The review panel met with SQAA's staff and HE stakeholders. It organised sessions to fit the Slovenian context, as well as the nature of the targeted review. The panel organised two sessions with a focused debate on the selected enhancement area of independence. In addition, the self-selected enhancement area was discussed in other sessions with internal and external stakeholders.

The review panel met with the following representatives:

- SQAA leadership
- SQAA staff
- SQAA Council members
- SQAA Appeals Committee members
- Vocational colleges
- HEIs, including a separate session with private HEIs
- Students
- Ministry
- Reviewers' pool
- The working group that was preparing draft legislation on the QA agency.

All interviews were conducted in English with a small number of participants using an interpreter external to SQAA. The interpreter was present at all sessions to support those participants who felt they would rather speak in Slovenian. The review team felt that everyone was able to express themselves during the sessions.

It was decided not to conduct a separate interview with the working group responsible for producing the SAR, as the members of this group would fully overlap with the participants in other sessions.

When discussing the issues related to standards 2.2 to 2.7, the participants of the meetings were asked to focus mainly on the external evaluation of sample study programmes, as per the terms of reference for this targeted review. However, for ESG 2.6, the review team investigated SQAA's operations in their entirety.

The review panel used the possibility to clarify any pending issues on the last day of the visit.

The review panel appreciates the openness of all interviewees invited by SQAA and the quality of all discussions. The review panel felt welcome and was able to conduct the site visit in a manner appropriate for a targeted and enhancement-oriented review. The panellists believe the SQAA was productive and professional. The agency staff were well prepared, forthright and engaged. At this point, the panel wishes to thank them for their engagement and positive contribution to all discussions.

Finally, the panel wishes to emphasise that the student panel members contributed fully to all discussions and meetings of the site visit.





CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

There have been no changes in the HE or QA system since the last visit in 2018.

There has been a change in the national context. In 2018, the review panel described SQAA's efforts in proposing and working towards legislative changes to introduce a new Agency Act. This law was predicted to govern SQAA and quality-related issues in HE. The idea was that it would resolve SQAA's open issues, such as conducting QA procedures abroad; and also that it would be more open and flexible as a smaller piece of legislation in case anything needs to be updated in future. SQAA worked closely with HE stakeholders and the proposed law was agreed by all. Before it was sent to the Parliament for discussion, a change of the Minister responsible for HE due to the national elections, led to the pause in processing this legal pro-

posal. Since the national elections in 2022, the new Minister organised a stakeholder working group, which is coordinating a broader set of changes in HE legislation. SQAA is part of the discussion. At the interviews, all stakeholders supported SQAA's efforts and agreed legal proposals regarding the agency and the QA-related topics. The Ministry representatives were in agreement with SQAA and other stakeholders. The panel was told that it is only a question of how best to place proposed changes – as part of the bigger HE law change, or to introduce a separate Agency Act. The panel has all reason to believe that the intention of the Ministry and all stakeholders are for the legal changes to improve SQAA's legal arrangements.

At the site visit, the panel also learned from the SQAA that the HE system is now more stabilised in the country. All established HE programmes went through one cycle



of SQAA evaluation, there was a legislative move towards consolidation with a move towards institutional accreditation and sample programme evaluation, and the number of HE institutions and overall study programmes has stabilised.

SQAA'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

There have been no changes in the governance of the agency since the last visit in 2018. The agency has 20 employees, which is the same number as reported in SAR in 2018.

The agency changed its internal operational structure twice since the last visit in 2018. In 2020, one department was separated in two to support the agency's focus on analytical work. In 2022, the agency reorganised professional services into three departments: the Quality Assurance and International Cooperation Department (7 staff members), the Analytics and Information Technology Department (7 staff

members) and the General Affairs Department (5 staff members). The reorganisation was intended to separate various departments' responsibilities better and support the leadership transition. Two heads of departments are anticipated to retire soon, and the reorganisation is supporting a handover and introduction of their replacements. The panel found the organisation of the agency to work well and appropriately supports all operations that the agency performs.

SQAA'S FUNDING

There have been no changes in the funding of the agency since the last visit in 2018. SAR reports that the agency has enough resources for its operations. Moreover, it states that since the previous self-assessment, the agency has increased its financial resources, which are fully sufficient for its operation.



SQAA'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

Since 2018, the agency has implemented one new procedure in its portfolio of QA activities, i.e., annual evaluations of a sample of study programmes. During the last ENQA review in 2018, this procedure was set up formally but not yet implemented. Hence, the review panel in this review focused on both the formal side of the process and its implementation and practice. We cover our findings below under standards of the ESG 2.1 to 2.7.

Each year, SQAA identifies a sample of study programmes in a selected field. In 2019, the agency focused on the study programmes which had not been re-accredited before and those that had dis-located units outside Slovenia. In 2020, the focus was on the international dimension; in 2021, the sample was drawn from teacher training study programmes, and in 2022, the focus was on the third-cycle study programmes. 72 evaluations of study programmes samples were carried out between 2019 and 2022.

There were no other changes in SQAA's functions, activities and procedures. However, we copy a table from SAR to showcase the scale of the agency's operations since the last review.

Table 1: Decisions in accreditation and evaluation procedures since 2018

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Study programmes						
Accreditation of new programmes ^a	9	29	13	17	9	77
Withdrawal of application for accreditation	1	8	7	5 + 1 rejected	4	26
Negative decisions in accreditation procedures	2	1	1	0	1	5
Evaluation of a sample (all) ^b	/	12	18	27	17	74
Non-compliances identified	/	4	4	2	8	18
Extraordinary evaluation	1	1	0	0	1 + 1(HEI)	4
Total	13	55	43	52	41	204
Higher education institutions						
Initial accreditation ^c	0	0	0	1	0	1
Reaccreditation (all) ^d	0	2	7	4	13	26
Reaccreditation for a shorter period	0	0	4	1	4	9
Transformation	2	0	1	2	2	7
Withdrawal of application in HEI procedures	1 (initial accreditation)	2 (reaccreditation + transformation)	0	0	0	3
Negative decisions in HEI procedures	0	1 (initial accreditation)	1 (initial accreditation)	0	1	3
Total	3	5	13	8	20	49
Higher vocational colleges^e						
External evaluation (positive and qualified positive opinions)	9	15	8	8	10	50
Negative opinions	0	0	0	1	1	2
Total	9	15	8	9	11	52

^a The procedure determines whether new study programmes comply with the quality standards determined for initial accreditation. The main areas of assessment cover the composition and content as well as the concept of the implementation of the study programme. Accreditation of a study programme is granted for an indefinite period or the application is denied.

^b The procedure determines whether accredited study programmes comply with the quality standards determined for external evaluation of study programmes. The main areas of assessment cover the modification and updating of a study programme, its implementation and the quality assurance system of a higher education institution in the part referring to quality assurance and improvement of a study programme (self-evaluation). The basis for the assessment shall be a self-evaluation report containing the evaluation of the areas of assessment from this chapter. The external evaluation of a study programme shall be performed in the reaccreditation procedure of a higher education institution or extraordinary evaluation of a study programme, or as an evaluation of a sample of study programmes.

^c The procedure determines whether new higher education institutions comply with the conditions and quality standards determined for initial accreditation. The main areas of assessment cover the operation of higher education institution, human resources and material conditions. Initial accreditation of a higher education institution is granted for a period of five years or the application is denied.

^d The procedure determines whether accredited higher education institutions comply with the quality standards determined for external evaluation

higher education institutions. The procedure for reaccreditation of a higher education institution shall be carried out by external evaluation and shall conclude with a decision on reaccreditation. External evaluation is the procedure of the comprehensive assessment of the operation of a higher education institution in the period since the previous accreditation. The assessment shall consider the progress and development since the previous accreditation in all areas of assessment, especially the internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution. The basis for the assessment shall be a self-evaluation report which shall include the evaluation of the whole set of activities and the evaluation of the implementation and modifications of study programmes to assure the quality of educational, scientific, professional or artistic work in the fields and disciplines of study programmes. Re-accreditation of a higher education institutions is granted for a period of maximum five years (or less, but maximum three years) or is not granted.

^e In the external evaluation processes of higher vocational colleges, the agency assesses whether a college meets the standards laid down in the criteria for external evaluation of higher vocational colleges. In this process of the group of experts has a similar task to the group in the re-accreditation procedure of the higher education institution, as well as the phases in the procedure until the final evaluation report is issued. The fields of assessment are the same, but the group of experts must take into account the special features of the higher vocational college. The Agency adopts an opinion on whether a college complies with the standards of quality. The accreditation is given by the ministry, responsible for higher vocational education.

III.3 FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF SQAA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.4 Thematic Analysis

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

2018 review recommendation

In the 2018 review, the panel and the Register Committee found SQAA to be partially compliant with ESG 3.4.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to develop a method for producing and disseminating thematic analyses on issues relevant to its stakeholders.

Register Committee stated:

The Register Committee, therefore, concurred with the panel's conclusion that SQAA partially complies with the standard.

Evidence

At the last review in 2018, the panel heard the Director's plans to establish an analytical department within SQAA. Moreover, the new information system, eNAKVIS was expected to support various analyses with more efficient access to data.

This panel learned that the analytics department was indeed established in 2019;

initially with additional tasks (international cooperation and IT) and in 2022 as a stand-alone unit. As described in the Introduction section, the agency is organised into three departments, of which the analytical section is one. With seven staff members, it is also substantially resourced compared to other departments as they have seven and five staff members, respectively. The information system iNAKVIS was also set up, which provides a good basis for accessing data for analyses.

Based on the SAR and discussions at the site visit, the Analytics and Information Technology Department's main areas of work are preparing, conducting, writing and publishing plans and reports, strategy documents, analyses, manuals, guides and the agency's annual publications. The department also organises and participates in various conferences, consultations, training sessions and workshops. Moreover, it is responsible for setting up databases, IT tasks and any translation work. The SAR stated (p. 36) that SQAA conducted five thematic analyses since the ENQA review in 2018.

To address the recommendations of the ENQA's panel in 2018, SQAA wrote and adopted a Methodology and Procedure for the Production and Dissemination of

Thematic Analyses. SAR reports that this document sets out the detailed procedure for systemic analyses and the framework for the dissemination of their findings, as well as external stakeholders' participation in initiating and producing subsequent more detailed (thematic) analyses. Based on SAR, the document also clearly defines the target group of these analyses.

The panel checked the document, and it found it to be clear. It includes guidelines on process, approach and cyclicity of analyses. After describing system-wide and thematic reports and their purpose, the document explains that stakeholders may initiate analyses by submitting a suggestion to the agency, which the analytics department reviews. The document also elaborates on information that needs to be included in analysis reports (author name, initiator, list of sources and literature and similar). Stakeholders have an opportunity to suggest analyses also at various meetings and events that the agency organises. The review panel discussed thematic analyses with external stakeholders and staff in detail and found that everyone felt the agency conducts useful and relevant analyses, that it does so regularly and that everyone can initiate suggestions. SQAA Council gets familiarised with all conducted analyses, while findings are also presented to stakeholders and published on the agency's website. The SAR further reports that SQAA continuously extends and deepens thematic cooperation with different stakeholders through training sessions for professionals and employees and consultations for other interested higher education stakeholders.

The Methodology document specifies that system-wide analysis is done every five years at the end of the five-year institutional evaluation cycle. This meta-analysis includes individual study areas, types of study programmes, types of institutions or individual areas of assessment and quality indicators. The general system-wide analysis examines general results according to

generalised indicators, which are consistently based on all standards of quality of all areas of assessment. The 2018 panel found that the first system analysis was published in 2013, covering the period 2010-2013. The second was published in 2018, covering the period 2014-2017. This panel found that the next analysis (covering 2018 –2023) is ongoing; some analysis of data has been completed, and the report is under preparation and will be published in 2024.

In addition, the agency conducts specific thematic analyses that address specific issues, which are conducted annually. The Methodology document mentioned before sets out the process for determining annual specific analyses, which the Council decides after input from other relevant stakeholders.

Finally, the agency conducts research supporting the sector on various issues, such as transnational education, distance learning and independence. The panel found this to be in addition to thematic analyses as per the ESG 3.4 requirement.

Analysis

The 2018 recommendation to SQAA was to develop a method for producing and disseminating thematic analyses. This was completed, and EQAR was informed. EQAR asked this panel to check the implementation of this Methodology. The panel recognises the effort that SQAA put into work around thematic and system analyses, which resulted in strong analytical work. SQAA conducts relevant analyses for the sector and is responsive to stakeholders' needs in this respect.

First, the Methodology document sets out the procedure and cyclicity of publishing. The agency follows the Methodology and regularly publishes reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external QA activities. As mentioned, the meta-analysis is published every five years, with the most recent one under prepara-

tion at the time of the panel's visit. Moreover, the panel found that the Guide to external analysis, prepared in 2021 and published in 2022, is found to be incredibly useful by all internal and external stakeholders (agency staff, review experts, HEIs and the Ministry). The Guide includes analytical sections in that each criterion the SQAA defines is elaborated on and includes the analysis of the most common mistakes in understanding and implementing particular criteria.

In addition, it includes analyses of appropriate implementation. All stakeholders referred to this document and the analysis behind it as useful in their everyday operation, as well as contributing to the reflection on and the improvement of QA policies and processes at institutional and national levels.

Second, the panel found that in addition to the system-wide analyses (5-year meta-report and the Guidelines for external assessment), SQAA also conducts specific thematic analyses annually, as suggested by various stakeholders. Moreover, as mentioned before, continuous research is conducted to support the HE system on other relevant issues.

Third, the agency includes its Council members in discussing analyses, its findings, and stakeholders through various bespoke events. At the visit, the panel found that all stakeholders confirmed that SQAA's analytical work is high quality and relevant. They also assured the panel that the agency staff are highly competent and knowledgeable in analytical and advisory work, who, in addition to publishing various analyses and research, also advise and support the sector via events, meetings, training and other means, including social media posting of information; or simply a phone call.

Finally, the panel found that while the agency prepared and implemented the Methodology and conducted and published analyses, there might be terminol-

ogy differences between the ESG and the Methodology document. For example, while the ESG specifies thematic analyses to refer to analysing evaluation reports, the SQAA uses the terminology of thematic analyses to refer to these (analyses of evaluation reports) as well as to research more broadly. For the clarity of the diversity of analyses and research conducted, the panel recommends that SQAA considers the terminology it uses for different kinds of research and analytical work.

Panel commendation 1

The panel commends the agency on the Guide for external assessment since it includes elements of thematic analysis that are presented jointly with the methodological instructions for conducting external QA. It is deemed of high relevance and usefulness by all stakeholders.

Panel commendation 2

The panel commends the agency on its internally developed IT system, which is high quality and relevant in supporting the agency with data for research and as a resource to manage labour and processes.

Panel recommendation 1

The panel recommends that SQAA considers the terminology used for thematic analyses and other kinds of research it conducts.

Panel conclusion:



ESG 3.6 Internal Quality Assurance and Professional Conduct

Standard:

Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

2018 review recommendations

In 2018, SQAA was found to be partially compliant with ESG 3.6 by the ENQA panel and the Register Committee.

The ENQA review panel highlighted a number of concerns in its analysis of SQAA's compliance with this standard. The panel found that while SQAA's documents, such as the Quality Manual, imply a proper internal QA system for the agency, its implementation seems to be mismatched. The panel's concerns mostly address a potential lack of quality culture, internal constituents' involvement in SQAA's QA (including the agency's Council and employees), external stakeholders' involvement in feedback mechanisms beyond filling out a survey, and similar. The panel was also concerned with stakeholders' perceptions of different treatments by the SQAA depending on which HEI they are from.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to include external stakeholders more directly in the internal evaluation and quality improvement activities of the agency. Also, proper feedback should be provided to better inform stakeholders about the results of surveys/actions taken by the agency. In addition, SQAA is recommended to involve all its bodies in the conception and implementation of its internal QA policy. As the highest decision-making body, the agency's Council could lead the way and play a more active role.

Register Committee stated:

The Register Committee, however, also noted the review panel's critical appraisal

of SQAA's interaction with the different stakeholders from different types of HEIs, and the question raised whether its quality policy was shared by all stakeholders. The Committee therefore considered that the flag was partially addressed and concurred with the panel's conclusion.

Evidence

• Preparation of SAR

The SAR stated that it was prepared by the agency selfevaluation group (SEG) composed of staff and one Council member. The agency also invited external stakeholders to participate in the SAR preparation and nominated the 'external team', composed of representatives of the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Slovenia, the Union of Independent Institutions of Higher Education, the Association of Slovene Higher Vocational Colleges and Student Organisation of Slovenia. The agency SEG prepared the text and led the procedure, while the external group commented on the draft text and participated in the preparation of the survey questionnaire that was sent out to stakeholders more broadly. Stakeholders also fed input via focus groups that the agency organised. The SAR was then discussed at agency staff meetings and Council sessions and finally adopted by the Director.

At the site visit, the panel found that stakeholders had even more formal and informal opportunities to feed back to the SQAA for SAR and, more generally. SQAA developed an enhancement-oriented quality culture, which stakeholders share. HEIs, vocational colleges, students, and others reported that they are continuously being asked to provide feedback on the agency's work and suggestions for improvement consistently, formally, and informally. The panel learned that SQAA successfully established trusted relationships for an open discussion

with its stakeholders on how it operates, including rules and procedures, as well as its processes and ways of working.

- **Quality Manual**

The SAR stated that the Quality Manual is a central document for SQAA internal QA. The document was last updated in 2021 to introduce a new timeline of self-evaluation. SAR states that the basis for an internal QA is the SAR, which the agency, following the amendment of the Quality Manual in June 2021, prepares prior to the external review by ENQA, and a progress report prepared annually.

The panel analysed the quality manual and described the procedures laid out in it in the following paragraphs.

SQAA defines its QA procedures in the Quality Manual, first adopted in 2015 and last updated in June 2021. The document elaborates on five areas of QA: (i) accreditations and external evaluations, (ii) external system of QA of the agency, (iii) internal system of QA of the agency, (iv) criteria and other provisions, and (v) information system and provision of information. The third area is SQAA's internal QA, which specifies five sub-areas (management of the agency; agency Council; human resources; improvement of the internal QA system; meta-reports and meta-analyses).

These five areas with numerous sub-areas specify a large and substantial quality assessment approach. The quality standards are defined for each of those areas. There are elaborated indicators for quality assessment (more than 70), which makes quality assessment thorough. Before the visit, the panel was concerned that this system might be too bureaucratic. However, internal and external stakeholders found the approach to the QA clear and constructive.

The Quality Manual specifies the self-evaluation group to consist of at least four employees and one Council member; and is appointed for one self-evaluation period,

which is said to be five years. The group cooperates with external stakeholders. The quality loop is specified to include a connection between (i) the agency's work and action plan, (ii) implementation of tasks from the plan and reporting of it, (iii) SAR and work and operation report, (iv) assessment of self-evaluation findings and determination of measures of improvement. The work and financial plans are annual documents, and so are the operation and financial reports.

The Manual further specifies that SAR is produced by the self-evaluation group one year before the expiration of ENQA membership and EQAR listing, i.e. at least once in a five-year period. SAR is based on the annual work or action plan. From meetings with the Council members and external stakeholders, the panel found that the SAR is discussed at the Council sessions, and stakeholders are included in its preparation. The SQAA Director adopts the final SAR.

SQAA annual work report includes an assessment of objectives and measures in various chapters.

- **Connecting with stakeholders**

To respond to the recommendations from 2018 about improving feedback mechanisms from stakeholders, SQAA adopted a new communication plan in 2018. Based on it and since 2018, SQAA's Director has visited all HEIs in the country between 2020 and 2022. The agency also organises an annual international conference on QA in HE since 2019. In addition, the agency organises numerous meetings, working groups and other events to connect with stakeholders. Moreover, the agency publishes all relevant documents in both their draft and final forms on its website, allowing stakeholders to comment.

The agency uses social media to communicate with various communities (Twitter and YouTube). It also introduced a monthly e-newsletter to inform stakeholders on issues related to the agency's work.

The Council engages with stakeholders too. Its members accompanied the Director on visits to HEIs. They also take part in the agency's events and expert training.

Analysis

The panel found that the SQAA has the mentioned Quality manual, which everyone is aware of and uses. The agency also has other documents to guide its work, including the Methodology for analyses and the Guide for external assessment. All of these documents and practices can be understood as the agency's quality policy as they are consistently used to improve the agency's work and continuously strive for quality enhancement. The panel found that the stakeholders know how to give feedback on the quality of SQAA's work and feel heard and having an impact. The understanding of the QA process is shared among all stakeholders.

The panel found that SQAA Council members are included in SQAA's internal QA and other work. They also engage with stakeholders in various ways, as listed in the evidence section. Therefore, the Council members' inclusion, as per the recommendation from 2018, is now improved.

As mentioned, the agency includes stakeholders in self-assessment and SAR preparation in three ways. First, their representatives are part of the 'extended' group who participate in self-assessment and writing up of the SAR. Second, a survey is sent out to stakeholders more broadly (but in 2022, it had only 131 respondents, while in 2019, it had 380). Third, the draft text is published on the agency website for anyone to comment. The panel found that there are numerous other formal and informal opportunities for stakeholders to feed into SQAA's work and give feedback that SQAA could have highlighted within the SAR. For example, in addition to collecting formal feedback after each evaluation procedure, the agency staff has an informal discussion with the respective HEI about its experience. Another example is the Director's

visits to HEIs that included Council members and staff. These are just two examples of various new and informal ways that the SQAA established to communicate with its stakeholders over the past five years. The panel found that stakeholders appreciate these new opportunities; and that the agency established trusted relationships. The panel finds ultimate evidence of impact of this is that review experts report they are now treated warmly and with trust by HEIs when they conduct evaluations compared to the past when they were treated with suspicion and reservation. The progress that SQAA has made since the last review is immense.

Panel commendation 1

The panel commends the agency on all the formal and informal ways of communication that it has established with its stakeholders over the past years. The agency worked specifically towards strengthening trusted relationships with stakeholders that go beyond the notion of control, which was particularly hard in the national context with reported over-regulation. With consistent and reliable multiple channels of communication, SQAA established a reputation as a valued and reliable partner.

Panel conclusion:





ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

2018 review recommendation

No recommendations were made in 2018. For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations in entirety as per the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

Evidence

All the external QA activities of SQAA are described in the supporting documents associated with each procedure, which are accessible on the website. As detailed in the SAR, and confirmed by the panel, the Accreditation Criteria are aligned with national higher education legislation (ZViS) and the ESG. The Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance (Part 1 of the ESG) are addressed in the Accreditation Cri-

teria and cover all of the agency's processes – the accreditation and external evaluation of HEIs and study programmes and external evaluation of higher vocational colleges. Study programmes selected for evaluation of samples are assessed according to the same quality standards as those set out in the Accreditation Criteria for assessing study programmes in the reaccreditation process of HEIs.

The SAR provides a table detailing the alignment of the agency's assessment schemes with the ESG Part 1. According to the table, the agency has considered all the ESG part 1 in the criteria of its procedures.

Analysis

The review panel explored the compliance of all SQAA's EQA activities with ESG Part 1, with a particular focus on the new activity introduced since the previous full review: External (sample) evaluation of a study programme. As confirmed by agency staff

Table 3. Compliance of the SQAA's EQA procedures with the ESG part I

ESG – Part 1 STANDARDS	Higher education institutions		Study programmes		Higher vocational colleges
	Accreditation (Articles 7 to 9 of the Accreditation Criteria)	Reaccreditation (Articles 10 to 16 of the Accreditation Criteria)	Accreditation (Articles 17 to 20 of the Accreditation Criteria)	External evaluation (Articles 21 to 23 of the Accreditation Criteria)	External evaluation (Articles 6 to 10 of the Criteria for External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges).
(1) Quality assurance policy	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 1, 6, Article 16	ST 1, 2, 4	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 1, 6, 19
(2) Design and adoption of study programmes	ST 1, 6, 7	ST 2, 7, Article 16 (+ Chapter II.2.2)	ST 1, 2	ST 1	ST 18, 20, 21
(3) Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	ST 3, 4, 10	ST 2, 11, 12	ST 4, 5	ST 4, 5	ST 10, 11, 12, 13, 21
(4) Enrolment, progress, recognition and validation of knowledge of students	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 6, 10, 11, 12, 13 (+ Chapter II.2.2 + Article 23)	ST 5	ST 5	ST 2, 4, 5, 9, 12
(5) Teachers	ST 6, 7	ST 3, 8	ST 4	ST 4, 5	ST 3, 8, 21, 22
(6) Learning resources and student support	ST 4, 8, 9, 10, 11	ST 4, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17	ST 3, 4	ST 4	ST 4, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21
(7) Information management	ST 5	ST 5, 6	ST 1	ST 1	ST 5, 6, 15, 17, 18
(8) Information to the public	ST 1, 3	ST 5, 7	* Covered under institutional evaluation.	ST 5 (+ Chapter II.2.2)	ST 5, 7, 22
(9) Continuous monitoring and periodic assessment of study programmes	ST 1, 5 (+ Article 21, 22 + Chapter II.2.2)	ST 6, 13, Article 16	* Covered under institutional evaluation.	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 6, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21
(10) Cyclical external quality assurance	* Chapters III.3 and III.4 of the Accreditation Criteria				ST 1 (+ Chapter III.3.1 of the Criteria for External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges).

and stakeholders, apart from the newly introduced procedure, the agency's review work has not changed since the last ENQA review. The panel checked to ensure that the references in the table above were part of each procedure's handbook. The panel further checked a sample of reports to ensure that the references in the table above were actually present within the reports. In both cases, matters were as described in the SAR. Interviews with representatives of HEIs revealed that they were content that SQAA's procedures supported their institution's responsibility for QA. In particular, they stated that the agency's evaluation supports the enhancement of their own quality procedures and the quality

culture more generally. They stated that the agency's quality of evaluation has advanced in recent years, including the support documents and tools, the support of the agency staff, the quality of reviewers' work, the diversity of reviewers, the quality of reviewers' recommendations, and so on. The outputs of the SQAA evaluation were deemed positively impactful. Consequently, the panel was content that these procedures remained compliant with this standard.

The panel looked more closely at compliance related to the new activity, as demonstrated below with standards ESG 2.2 – 2.7. The panel focused only on this new activity

with the exception of ESG 2.6, which is a standard that was partially compliant in 2018. For this reason, the panel considered SQAA's operations in their entirety for ESG 2.6.

The panel determines that the newly introduced activity - External (sample) evaluation of a study programme - is compliant with ESG 2.1 as it follows the same standards and procedures as other methods. Consequently, and taken together with the compliance of the existing evaluative activity, SQAA is compliant with this standard.

Specifically:

- 1.1 Policy for quality assurance – the methodology checks that a policy is in place, how it was developed and how effective it is.
- 1.2 Design and approval of programmes – The methodology analyses how programmes are designed and approved and that these meet required standards.
- 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment – the methodology examines the role of students and how they engage with the programme.
- 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification – the methodology checks the processes from admission to qualification and how consistently they are applied.
- 1.5 Teaching staff – the methodology checks the competence of the teaching staff
- 1.6 Learning resources and student support – the methodology checks the learning resources available to students to support their study.
- 1.7 Information management – the methodology examines what data and information is gathered and how it is used to manage programmes.
- 1.8 Public information – the methodology checks the quality and relevance of the information available about the programme.
- 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes – the methodology checks how programmes are reviewed – how often and what improvements are made as a result.
- 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance – the methodology checks the institutions status re regular external review.

To conclude, the panel considered all of the methodologies developed and used by the agency. The panel also confirms there have been no changes since 2018 apart from the implementation of the sample programme evaluation. All stakeholders confirmed this.

Panel conclusion:



ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found it substantially compliant, while the Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.2.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to apply the adopted Methodology with maximum flexibility, ensuring its fitness for purpose for all Slovenian institutions regardless of size and profile. If need be, the Methodology should be revised in order to make it more effective. In addition, SQAA is recommended to focus on quality enhancement rather than quality control and to foster further development of a quality culture within Slovenian higher education.

Register Committee stated: /

Evidence

The evaluation of sample of study programmes is SQAA's new activity since the agency's last ENQA review in 2018. This evaluation is designed to be advisory in nature and aims to promote the quality improvement of study programmes. The SAR reports that this procedure allows SQAA's experts and council members to advise HEIs on quality enhancement and modifying of study programmes without burdening institutions. This very procedure is thus making SQAA's processes more fit for purpose.

After an evaluation, the agency Council makes recommendations for institutions to improve the quality of the particular study programme. The institution is expected to report back on progress in a given time period, normally two years. After reviewing such progress reports, the Council decides if their recommendations have been implemented. If any particular problems are found at the evaluation, then an HEI is requested to implement a change immediately and report back sooner. The agency staff and the Council then check this.

In 2019, the agency organised a training about this new procedure for its experts to support its implementation. SAR reports stakeholders' satisfaction with this new approach.

Analysis

The panel finds the new process fit for purpose. It allows experts and the Council to be more flexible and to take into account the specific context of particular HEIs and their study programmes. This is especially so because the outputs of this procedure are recommendations and not accreditation decisions. In this way, the experts and the Council can support the specificities of HEIs and study programmes while respecting the criteria and standards. The panel checked stakeholders' satisfaction with this new procedure at the site visit, in particular HEIs. The panel learned from interviews with the stakeholders that this new process is much more useful than the previous approaches. They also find it enhancement oriented. Consequently, HEIs appreciate this new process and the way that SQAA conducts it.

Panel conclusion:



ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant, while the Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.3.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to determine the nature of the follow-up in its QA processes, and not only in external assessments with a negative outcome. Furthermore, SQAA is recommended to develop a shared understanding of criteria and publish the official interpretation of the criteria and regulations.

Register Committee stated:

The Register Committee accepted that this constitutes a form of follow up and was therefore able to concur with the panel's conclusion that SQAA complies with the standard. The Committee nevertheless considered that the corresponding flag was only partially addressed and encouraged SQAA to seriously consider the panel's recommendations.

Evidence

All accreditation and evaluation procedures, including for the evaluated one, start with the submission of an application accompanied by a self-evaluation report of the HEI, followed by the assessment of the documents and the visit to the institution, the preparation of the group of experts' report, which is sent to the applicants for comments, and the preparation of the final report, in which the group of experts assess the comments sent. The agency Council, as the highest decision-making body, then takes a decision on the basis of the final report, the application, the institutional self-evaluation report and other documentation obtained in the process.

These procedures are specified in the Criteria for evaluation and accreditation, Guide to assessment and the Rules of Procedure of the Agency Council.

Moreover, the templates that HE institutions need to fill out include detailed instructions.

SQAA acted on the 2018 recommendations of the ENQA review to ask HEIs for follow-up in QA processes and for assessments beyond those with negative outcomes. SQAA updated its procedures in 2020 so that in case of positive accreditation outcomes, HEIs report on their progress within two years or earlier in case experts found deficiencies at the evaluation. These reports can be done within institutions' self-evaluation in that it forms a part of a standard self-evaluation activity. This is so that update reports do not bring much additional work to institutions. SAR reports that this practice further strengthens the internal QA of HEIs.

Sample study programme evaluations started in 2019; hence, the first progress reports were considered in 2021. The agency found most reports to adequately report on institutions' progress in relation to the programmes since the review.

Analysis

The panel finds the processes to be implemented in accordance with the requirements of the standard. Sample study programmes are evaluated based on the same criteria as other evaluation and accreditation activities (starting with the self-evaluation report, then with the expert site visit resulting in a report and having a consistent follow-up). Moreover, SQAA puts effort into ensuring the follow-up procedure on all accreditation decisions, negative and positive, including for the evaluated activity.

Following ENQA's recommendation in 2018, the panel asked HEIs how they found this new procedure of follow-up in all of the agency's activities in 2 years. It found that

they appreciate the new procedure and the support from the SQAA. The panel also found that the SQAA communicates with HEIs how best to ensure follow-up without extra burden on institutions. While HEIs reported that follow-up obviously requires some work, the agency commendably listens to suggestions on making this as light and tailored as possible.

Panel conclusion:



ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant, while the Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.4.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended reconsidering the expert pool especially given the introduction of institutional reviews. The expert pool should be sufficiently diverse and include students of all types of Slovenian institutions. Special efforts and extra resources are needed to engage (more) international peers.

Register Committee stated: /

Evidence

SQAA has elaborated Criteria for agency experts adopted in 2018 and updated in 2022. The criteria include conditions for experts that serve in all types of external QA activities of HEIs by the agency.

SQAA organised training for experts who served on sample study programme evaluations in 2019, and a detailed protocol has been developed for sample study programme evaluations. They also ran a specific training session for chairs on this new procedure.

Analysis

The panel found that sample study programme evaluation is carried out by groups of external experts that include student members. The experts are carefully selected, have appropriate skills and are supported by the agency via training and other activities. Proper no-conflict-of-interest mechanisms are applied in the same way as in other accreditation and evaluation procedures. International experts are increasingly included in the sample programme evaluation as the updated Criteria

also require at least one international expert to be part of the expert panels for all evaluations that SQAA conducts. Criteria also require at least one international expert to be part of the expert panels for all evaluations that SQAA conducts.

SAR states that the agency received criticisms from some HEIs regarding the expertise of experts. Consequently, it amended its criteria for experts to demand that experts must have been active in scientific and research, professional or artistic fields for the last ten years, except for student members. SAR states that this change meant that the assessments are carried out by experts who are active in research in their field and have more clout among HEIs. SQAA also works hard to increase the diversity of its expert pool. It signed memorandums of cooperation with ESU to include more international students; it cooperates with other agencies to share experts or recruit experts more widely; it publishes the call for experts on the websites of other agencies and networks, and so on.

The panel asked the agency about the experts and found that HEIs believe the diversity and competency of experts have increased substantially over the past years. They think that experts are now better trained and supported. As a result, they come better prepared for the site visits than before. HEIs also reported on experts being knowledgeable and providing useful advice. More international experts are also included in the reviews beyond the Balkans area. Key documentation is translated into English so that they can prepare properly. After the visit, the draft reports are written in English and translated into Slovenian for the official procedure at the Council session. The panel asked HEIs about their satisfaction with experts for sample programme reviews, and it found that the majority of experts are appropriately prepared for enhancement-oriented evaluations. However, they mentioned that there is a small number of experts who do not differentiate between enhancement-oriented

sample evaluation and accreditation that is focused on checking standards. At the same time, HEIs felt that the number of such experts is small and that the agency will continue training experts in this regard. Therefore, HEIs had no particular concerns regarding experts and confirmed that the agency has appropriate tools and procedures in place to support the experts in their work. The panel found that SQAA plans to continuously train and support experts in future and concurs with HEIs that experts will be better and better versed in differentiating between enhancement and accreditation procedures.

The panel also discussed this with the experts themselves. It found that the experts say they get relevant and appropriate training. They also appreciate the tools and documents that the agency developed for them. The experts report that the agency staff offers extensive support in their work. Students feel equal members of review teams, appreciated and able to contribute the same as every-one else.

To conclude, the panel learned that the same criteria for panels are used in the new procedure (sample programme evaluation) as in other programme accreditation, but the outcome is different. In the sample programme evaluation, HEIs receive recommendations which are enhancement oriented. In accreditation, they receive a yes/no decision. The expert composition and the procedure are the same, but expert panels have been trained for this new procedure, know how to adjust and receive written and oral guidance.

Panel conclusion:

COMPLIANT

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant. The Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.2.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to encourage institutions to include consistent follow-up procedures in their internal quality assurance system. In addition, SQAA is recommended to formalise the decision-taking process taking into account the different roles and tasks of the expert panel (external assessment report), the agency's Director and staff (proposal for decision), and the agency Council (formal decision).

Register Committee stated:

Having considered the clarification, the Register Committee was able to concur with the panel's conclusion that SQAA complies with the standard.

Evidence

The standards and criteria for the evaluation of study programmes are described in the Accreditation Criteria and are the same for all programme evaluation variants (a study programme may be evaluated as part of the process of reaccreditation of an HEI, evaluation of a sample of a study programme or an extraordinary evaluation of a study programme). The criteria are published on the SQAA website, together

with the accreditation application forms that HEIs use. These forms provide further details and clarification. In addition, the agency prepared and published an interpretation of some of the criteria in 2019 and a Guide to assessment in 2022. The agency also published a series of videos on YouTube about navigating the accreditation process and criteria to help in the consistency of stakeholders' understanding of the criteria and SQAA's approach to using them.

Analysis

The panel found the criteria for an evaluation of sample study programmes explicit and published.

SQAA reported in various sections of the SAR that some stakeholders (particularly smaller and private HEIs) report they feel the agency treats HEIs differently and is not consistent in decision-making. The panel inquired various stakeholders about this in relation to the evaluation of sample study programmes as well as more broadly. It found that all stakeholders feel the agency in its entirety (staff, experts, the Director, the Council) treats them fairly and equally. No-one reported any unequal treatment. All stakeholders that the panel met reported that SQAA uses criteria consistently.

The agency ensures consistent application of criteria via educative activities, such as internal coordination and training of staff and Council Members, training of experts, and training and workshops for HEIs and stakeholders.

Moreover, the Council continuously reflects on its decisions and in 2018 adopted the Rules of Procedure of the Agency Council, which specifies the procedure for processing applications, decision-making, and the role of SQAA's professional. In 2020 and 2022, the Rules of Procedure were amended to further specify Council's de-

cision-making process and its consistency, such as having designated rapporteurs, or preparing tables with strengths, opportunities for improvement, partial compliances and non-compliances or major deficiencies across decision objects.

The evaluation and accreditation criteria are explicit, elaborated in the SQAA's rules and procedures; and explained in detail in the aforementioned Guide to external assessment. Stakeholders find all of these documents and procedures clear, explicit and useful.

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

2018 review recommendation

ESG 2.6 was a focus area of this targeted review because SQAA was partially compliant with it in the last review of 2018. For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations in their entirety.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to publish all reports, including those with a negative outcome in the case of initial accreditation procedures for reasons of transparency and further development.

Register Committee stated:

While all reports now seem to be available on the website, the next external review of SQAA should analyse in detail whether the new website took full account of the shortcomings identified by the panel.

Evidence

The SAR states that SQAA redesigned and launched its new website in 2018 in terms of content and accessibility. Expert reports

Panel conclusion:



are said to be published on the website as soon as the accreditation decision is enforced. The website is said to publish all expert reports, including those from the sample programme evaluation and those with negative accreditation decisions.

The panel checked the SQAA website and indeed found all reports published on the Slovenian version of the website. The reports are also easy to find on the site.

In the case of appeals, SAR states that the Appeals Committee's decisions are not published as such, but they are always part of the minutes and decisions of the agency's Council, as the Appeals Committee's decisions are a step in the accreditation and evaluation procedures.

The panel checked the website and the documents and verifies that these are published as stated in SAR.

Analysis

The panel found the agency's website useful and easy to navigate. The Slovenian version includes all documents, reports and other information produced or used by the agency, as well as links and connections to other relevant websites and information, such as legislation, links to HEIs and similar information that the public might find useful.

The English version included all relevant documents, such as accreditation and evaluation Criteria, Rules, Guidelines, main decisions, etc.

The agency publishes reports in their entirety. Moreover, for each HEI and study programme, one can access and download the expert reports as well as the agency's Council decisions. In addition, SQAA recorded promotional/introductory videos for institutions and programmes.

Consequently, as one navigates through the website and searches for information on a particular institution, one can see all relevant info compiled, i.e., basic information about the institution, its programmes, promotional videos, experts' reports, and accreditation decisions. All stakeholders confirmed that they can find all information and documents they need, that the agency's website is a valuable source of over-all information on the Slovenian HE system (not only the accreditation and evaluation specific technical documents and reports) and that the website is used as a reference point for stakeholders' questions and information needs about HE in Slovenia.

SQAA organises and promotes its website and the information it contains. For example, SAR reports that the agency launches an annual social media promotional campaign inviting future students, various student organisations and the media to its website. Moreover, the agency cooperates with the Slovenian Student Union to promote the agency's website and resources among potential students so they can use them in their decision-making about what and where to study. Another example is including accreditation decisions in the e-newsletter mentioned before, which draws readers' attention to all available documentation if they are interested in following particular decisions.

The overall transparency of the agency's rules and documents, as well as additional information, is commendable.

SQAA publishes information about HEIs and study programmes comprehensively and exhaustively. Reports are easy to find. They are consistent on the Slovenian and English versions of the website. It includes all relevant information in one place (expert reports, accreditation decisions and introductory videos recorded by SQAA). Members of the public can easily access all relevant information.

The website is updated regularly, and all reports are published as soon as the evaluation/accreditation process is complete.

To conclude, the panel would like to note the excellent work by SQAA on reporting.

Panel commendation 1

The panel commends SQAA for extending its transparent and useful website to further promotion of published reports and decisions to inform the HE sector via social media and similar channels. Especially cooperation with students is noted as productive and helpful.

Panel conclusion:



ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant. The Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.2.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to specify its complaints procedure as part of its quality assurance system and communicate this procedure more transparently to the institutions.

Register Committee stated: /

Evidence

As mentioned above, the study programme sample evaluation is designed to be advisory in nature, aiming to promote the quality improvement of study programmes. Therefore, the procedure is not concluded by a formal decision that can be appealed but by issuing recommendations to an HEI for the improvement of the quality of the study programme.

However, for the process of evaluating sample study programmes, HEIs have the same options as in other evaluation and accreditation procedures, i.e., they can object to procedural errors, express their disagreement with appointing a particular expert, propose exclusion of a staff member in the process, and comment the evaluation report before the group of experts finalises it. The complaints procedures follow the General Administration Law for

technical process, but the complaints procedures and decision-making are owned by the agency. All of these steps are part of the accreditation criteria, published on the SQAA website and accessible.

Analysis

As an evaluation of study programmes does not end in an accreditation decision but is enhancement- and advisory-oriented, there are no decisions to appeal against. Nevertheless, HEIs have options to object to other steps in the procedure in the same way as with other accreditation and evaluation processes.

HEIs have options to raise issues of concern where possible and sensible in evaluating sample study programmes. Institutions can state dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process. Based on the SAR and the interviews with HEIs and SQAA staff and bodies, the panel found that the agency staff handle any such concerns professionally and based on the published rules and procedures. The panel heard that stakeholders find the process clear, fit for purpose and appropriate.

During the evaluation of the sample study programmes, applicants have the possibility to object to procedural errors or to express their disagreement in the same way as in the procedure for reaccreditation of an HEI. First, before the appointment of the group of experts, the applicant is informed about the experts to be appointed for the evaluation of the study programme and has the opportunity to communicate their disagreement with them to the agency. If the Agency Council considers that the disagreement is justified (conflict of interest, inappropriateness in terms of fields, etc.), other experts shall be appointed to the group. Second, the applicant has the possibility to propose the exclusion of an expert, a staff member or an Agency Council member throughout the procedure, i.e.,



until the recommendations to the HEI have been issued. Fourth, the applicant can file a procedural objection (complaint) to the Council or the President of the Council due to the alleged impartiality of the persons who decide or participate in the procedure, and demand their exclusion, even before the Agency Council decides on the procedure.

Fifth, the applicant has one month to submit written comments on the evaluation report, which must be assessed by the group of experts and taken into account in the final report. All these options are run following the General Administrative Procedure Act and are communicated to the applicant during the procedure.

The panel discussed the complaints and appeals options in the evaluation of sample programmes with HEIs, the Appeals Committee members and the Council members and found that HEIs in sample programme evaluation can file complaints against all decisions in the process (e.g., in naming experts as mentioned above). HEIs, Appeals Committee and Council members find that there is clear and explicit procedure to appeal akin to other agency's decisions.

Panel conclusion:





III.4 ENHANCEMENT AREAS

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

In 2018, the panel found SQAA to be substantially compliant with ESG 3.3, and the Register Committee found it to be compliant. Since the last review in 2018, no legal changes have occurred regarding SQAA's role and function.

However, the agency acted on the ENQA's panel recommendation and worked to improve its operational independence and the public perception of its independence, which seemed to be one of the biggest issues in the previous review.

Organisational independence

SQAA remained organisationally independent as stipulated by legislative acts and agency statutes. As mentioned, there were no legal changes regarding SQAA's status. Therefore, the 2018 panel's description of evidence still holds. The legislation (ZViS) guarantees the independence of the agency. SAR reports that "Article 51e of the

ZViS stipulates that the agency is autonomous and independent in its operation. It is bound by the principles of professionalism, impartiality, legality and political neutrality". In 2018, the agency attempted to propose a new piece of legislation (a separate Agency Act). Since then, SQAA has worked on drafting this act; however, in 2022, there was an election in Slovenia, and a new government and the minister responsible for HE came into office, delaying the finalisation of the legislation. Recently, the Ministry has established a new group to take forward HE legislation, including legislation on quality. The SQAA Director is a member of this group.

The agency is keen to see new legislation for a number of reasons. These include some housekeeping to the current legislation to align with current practice and allow the agency to undertake accreditation abroad.

All stakeholders the panel consulted believed strongly in the independence of the agency. They both saw this as important and evident in the day-to-day workings of SQAA. Indeed, the SQAA is seen as a leader on the matter of independence across the region and through the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA). In 2020, it conducted a study in cooperation with CEENQA about the independence of agencies in European countries which was well received. The panel interviewed senior staff from three other quality agencies in the region who all testified to the leading role SQAA had played, providing inspiration and practical assistance to agencies where independence was not guaranteed.

Operational independence

One feature of SQAA's independence is its freedom to develop its own methodology for reviews. The agency has undertaken two cycles of institutional reviews. As highlighted earlier in this report, these reviews have remained stable since 2018, with the addition of the Sample Programme Methodology more recently. The agency is now considering how best to respond to the changing face of higher education in areas such as:

- After two cycles of institutional review, should they pursue a targeted institutional review model?
- How do they evaluate micro-credentials – as an institutional approach?
- How do they evaluate the accreditation of joint programmes in the European university initiative?

To help the agency explore the options available to it, the panel ran a workshop for agency staff and staff of other quality agencies from the region. Those present discussed the importance of external QA matching the system's performance, the specific challenges it faces and the context in which it operates, including history, culture, politics and the like. Everyone then

discussed three different approaches to targeted review that had been adopted in different quality agencies across Europe.

It was noted that the stakeholders of SQAA found it to be responsive and necessary for the improvement of quality in Slovenian higher education. The independence of the agency was not under question. So SQAA has an opportunity to engage positively with the sector to consider the future, consulting fully on a new approach without calling into question their independent status.

Independence of formal outcomes

In the previous ENQA agency review of SQAA, some stakeholders expressed their concern at the independence of the agency and its ability to make judgements independent of external influence. All stakeholders expressed their confidence in SQAA's ability to make judgements without external influence this time round. The agency had engaged positively with stakeholders over recent years and had established clear processes and procedures to ensure that its judgements were robust and consistent. The panel found that the agency was able to make judgements without interference.

Overall

To enhance the public perception of its independence and integrity, SQAA has taken a number of measures since 2018. First, the SAR reports that SQAA improved its conflict of interest policy and operations for the agency's constituents (staff, council members, appeals committee members and experts) as well as for applicants and stakeholders. Moreover, the agency established an 'integrity team' that monitors its operations, assesses risk, and trains SQAA's constituents on the prevention of conflict of interest. Second, the Council members, experts and Appeals Committee members sign a statement binding them to work in their own capacity and not act as representatives of any organisations. Moreover, the agency organises awareness-raising

activities to support understanding these principles. Third, the agency adopted a protocol of conduct in case of undue pressure or attempts to influence experts and prepared a statement of zero tolerance for pressure on council members, employees and experts. The Council's Rules of Procedure also require those present to declare at the start of each session if any attempts to exert influence in a particular matter have been made.

At the site visit, the panel explored the agency's approach to conflict of interest. It was clear that this was rigorous and well understood. It was also clear that institutions were happy with SQAA's procedures for choosing independent panels, and SQAA staff reported that there had been very few instances of pressure being put on panel members or staff.

SQAA also made an effort to follow the 2018 panel's recommendation to include more international experts in the review procedures. First, the Accreditation Criteria were amended in 2019, introducing a requirement that parts of an accreditation application must be translated into English to better support foreign expert involvement. The Criteria also requires that in the case of accrediting doctoral programmes and reaccreditation of universities, the group of experts must include at least two foreign experts from different countries.

Second, in December 2021, it set up a co-operation agreement with ESU to include more international students in evaluation procedures. Third, SQAA set up a register with potential foreign experts for evaluations. At the same time, the SAR recognises challenges with the continuous and sustained inclusion of foreign experts due to the translation costs of documentation that HEIs must submit for evaluation and accreditation procedures.

At the site visit, the panel inquired about the extent of involvement of foreign experts and stakeholders' views on that. It

was clear that as a small country with a limited population and small number of institutions, it welcomed the involvement of international experts. HEIs also commended the agency for recently increasing the number of international experts from beyond the Balkans area.

Overall, the panel recognises and appreciates the agency's efforts in advancing its independence. It has put a lot of effort into this. It is seen as a role model for other agencies in the region, and its own stakeholders are strongly supportive of its effective independence. The agency currently relies upon international experts from within the Balkans area. They have plans to expand this, and stakeholders are positive about them doing so. The current international experts from beyond the Balkans feel supported and enjoy their work.

However, the agency may have to translate some materials and provide training specifically for international experts to help them to integrate quickly into review panels and understand the Slovenian HE system. The introduction of the annual evaluations of a sample of study programmes has been well received. It would be helpful for the agency to continue to consider new and innovative approaches to external quality assurance, particularly to reduce burden and increase impact. This would further strengthen the agency's important role in Slovenian HE and further enhance its position as an independent evaluator of quality. In support of this, it would also be helpful for the agency to continue to consider its use of data and intelligence to better understand the quality of the Slovenian HE system.

The further development of thematic reporting, using such data and intelligence as a starting point, could further enhance the agency's role and perceived independence, particularly if it also reflected recommendations for the Government as well as for institutions.



III.5 CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

Panel commendation 1

The panel commends the agency on the Guide for external assessment since it includes elements of thematic analysis that are presented jointly with the methodological instructions for conducting ex-ternal QA. It is deemed of high relevance and usefulness by all stakeholders

Panel commendation 2

The panel commends the agency on its internally developed IT system, which is high quality and rel-evant in supporting the agency with data for research and as a resource to manage labour and pro-cesses.

ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

The panel commends the agency on all the formal and informal ways of communication that it has established with its stakeholders over the past years. The agency worked specifically towards strengthening trusted relationships with stakeholders that go beyond the notion of control, which was particularly hard in the national context with reported over-regulation. With consistent and reliable multiple channels of communication, SQAA established a level of valued and reliable partner.

ESG 2.6 Reporting

The panel commends SQAA for extending its transparent and useful website to further promotion of published reports and decisions to inform the HE sector via social media and similar channels. Especially cooperation with students is noted as productive and helpful.



OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

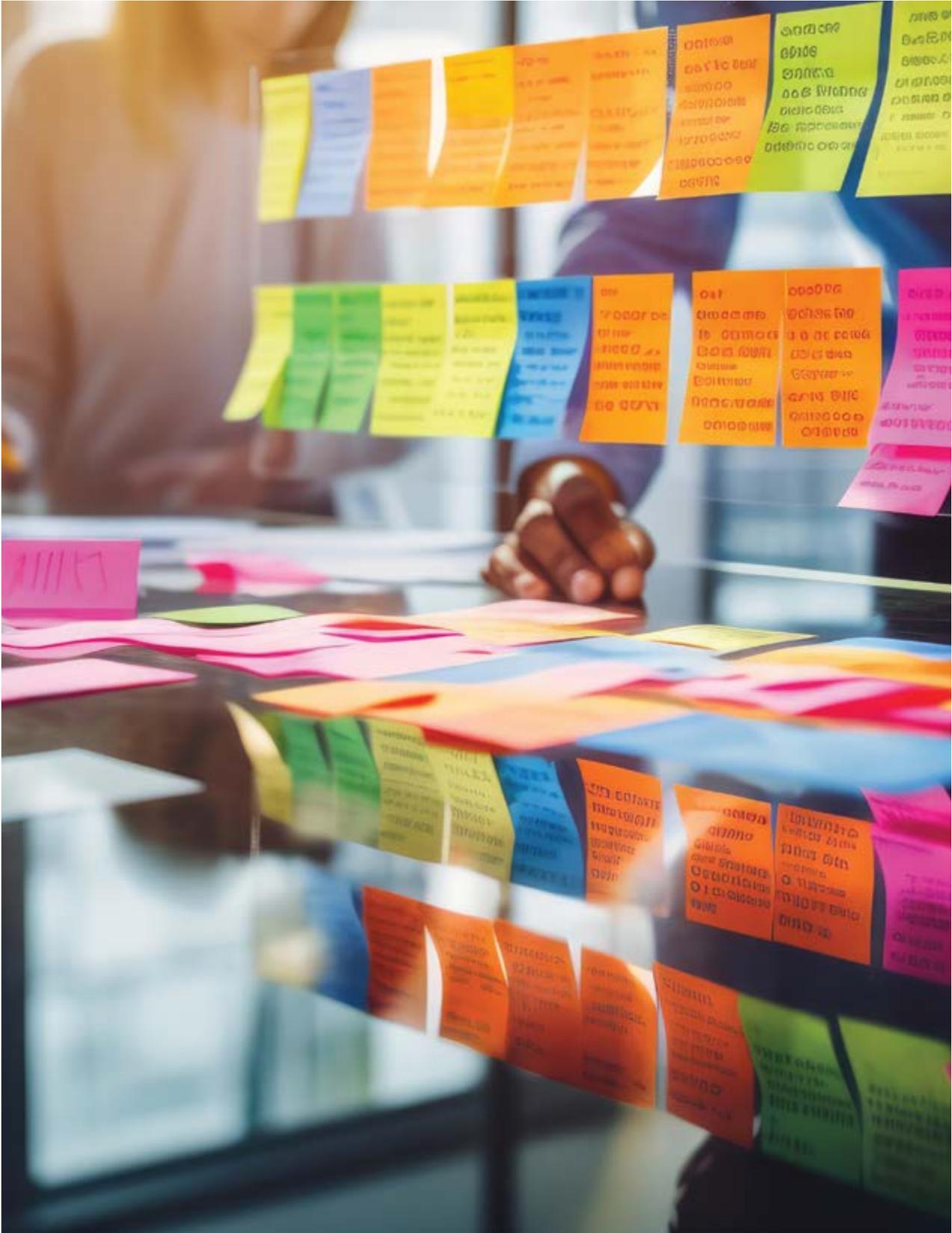
Standard	Judgement	Recommendation
ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis	compliant	The panel recommends that SQAA considers the terminology used for thematic analyses and other kinds of research it conducts.
ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct	compliant	
ESG 2.1 – Consideration of internal quality assurance	compliant	
ESG 2.2 – Designing methodologies fit for purpose	compliant	
ESG 2.3 – Implementing processes	compliant	

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, SQAA is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

The panel suggests that the agency include suggestions for other stakeholders in addition to institutions in its thematic analysis



III.6 ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION NO..	TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
6. 3. 2023 – spletni sestanek			
1	19. 1. 2023 120 minut	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit	All panel
2	6. 3. 2023 10.30–12.00	Online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify the agency's changes since the last full review against the ESG and to understand the background and motive of the agency's choice of the self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (next to the overall HE and QA context of the agency)	Head of the Department for Quality and International Cooperation Deputy Head of the Department for Quality and International Cooperation
21.3.2023 (Day 0, pre-visit)			
3	16.30 - onwards	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day 1	All panel
4	As necessary	A pre-visit meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify any remaining questions after the online clarifications meeting	Not needed
22.3.2023 – Day 1			
	9.30–10.00	Review panel's private meeting	
5	10.00 – 10.45	Meeting with the Director and the Chair of the Council	Director of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency Chair of the Council of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency
	10.45 – 11.00	Review panel's private discussion	
6	11.00 – 11.45	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team	Head of the Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation Head of the Department of Analytics and Information Technology Head of General Affairs Department
	11.45 – 12.00	Review panel's private discussion	

SESSION NO..	TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
7	12.00 – 12.45	Meeting with Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation (excluding the Head) and the General Affairs Department	Four people from Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation One person from the General Affairs Department
	12.45–13.45	Lunch (panel only)	
8	13.45 – 14.30	Meeting with the Department of Analytics and Information (excluding the Head)	Entire department
	14.30–14.45	Review panel's private discussion	
9	14.45–15.30	Meeting with the SQAA Council Members excluding the Chair	Representative of the Rector's conference Representative of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia Representative of independent HEIs Former Member of the Council (Representative of vocational colleges) Representative organisation of students
	15.30–15.45	Review panel's private discussion	
10	15.45–16.15	Meeting with the Appeals Committee	Three members
	16.15–16.30	Review panel's private discussion	
11	16.30–17.00	Meeting with representatives of Vocational Colleges	Head of Vocational College, Novo mesto Head of Vocational College, Gea College Head of Vocational College, Biotechnical Educational Centre Ljubljana (BIC Ljubljana) Head of Vocational College, Academia d.o.o. Head of the development of the Association of Vocational Colleges Student VET representative
	17.00–17.15	Review panel's private discussion	
12	17.15–18.00	Enhancement area session with SQAA Director, Council Chair, and Senior management team	Director of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency Chair of the Council of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (Employer's representative) Head of the Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation Head of the Department of Analytics and Information Technology Head of General Affairs Department

SESSION NO..	TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
13	18.00–18.30	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2	
23.3.2023 – Day 2			
	9.00–10.00	Review panel's private meeting	
14	10.00–10.45	Meeting with ministry representatives (both, responsible for HE and vocational colleges)	Acting Director-General Higher Education Directorate, Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Head of Higher Education Division, Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Higher Vocational Education Division, Ministry of Education
	10.45–11.00	Review panel's private discussion	
15	11.00–11.45	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/ HEI representatives	Vice-Rector for Internationalisation and Quality Assurance, University of Ljubljana Chair of the Quality Assessment Commission, University of Maribor Dean of Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska Vice-Dean of Faculty of Health Sciences Head of the Doctoral study programme, International School for Business and Social Studies
	11.45–12.00	Review panel's private discussion	
16	12.00–12.45 45 minut	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana University of Maribor University of Nova Gorica Alma Mater Europaea
	12.45–14.00	Lunch (panel only)	
17	14.00–14.45	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool	Reviewers' reps, including students (from Slovenia and from abroad) Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Maribor Faculty of Economics and Busi-ness, University of Maribor Student expert representative Law School, Leiden University Arts Academy of the University of Split Student expert representative
	14.45–15.00	Review panel's private discussion	

SESSION NO..	TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
18	15.00–15.45	A meeting with the working group that was preparing the draft legislation for SQAA (nominated by the Ministry)	Head of the working group, (former) representative of the Ministry for higher education Deputy Head of the working group, representative of the Agency Representative of the University of Ljubljana Representative of the University of Primorska Representative of the Alma Mater Europaea Representative of students
	15.45–16.00	Review panel's private discussion	
19	16.00–17.00	Meeting with various stakeholders (session focused on the Independence of SQAA as the enhancement area)	Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana (former Rector of University of Ljubljana) Dean at the School of Humanities, University of Nova Gorica President of Student organisation of University of Maribor Vice Head of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA, Ukraine) Secretary at the National Entity for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NEAQA, Serbia) Assistant Director of the Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ACQAHE, Montenegro)
	17.00–17.15	Review panel's private discussion	
20	17.15–18.00	Private HEIs	Former Vice-rector for education, University of Nova Gorica Dean of Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Novo mesto Vice-dean for education, Faculty of Polymer Technology President of the Association of private HEIs Secretary of the Association of private HEIs Director of the Environmental Protection College Dean of the Ljubljana School of Business (B2) Assistant Director, Faculty of Commercial and Business Sciences, ZOOM Student representative of private HEIs
21	18.00–18.30 30 minut	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions	

SESSION NO..	TIME	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
24.3.2023 – Day 3			
22	9.30–10.30	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	
23	10.30–11.00	Meeting with CEO and other agency staff to clarify any pending issues	
24	11.00–12.30	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings	
	12.30–13.30	Lunch (panel only)	
25	13.30–14.00	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	As decided by the agency

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

Targeted review of Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) against the ESG

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

The present Terms of Reference were agreed between SQAA (applicant), ENQA (coordinator) and EQAR.

(July 2022)

1. Background

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 01/06/2013 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration based on a targeted external review against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

SQAA has been a member of ENQA since 2015 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

SQAA is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Accreditation of international joint programmes
- Accreditation of new study programmes
- Assessing the requirements for entry of transnational higher education (THE) to the SQAA register
- External evaluation of vocational colleges
- Extraordinary evaluation of higher education institutions
- Extraordinary evaluation of study programmes
- External (sample) evaluation of a study programme
- Initial accreditation of higher education institutions
- Re-accreditation of higher education institutions
- Transformation of a higher education institution
- Notifications of international joint programmes and programmes of the international associations of universities accredited abroad

All these activities will be included on the agency's profile on the EQAR website and linked to DEQAR database. NB: The agency may not upload reports from other activities to DEQAR.

Should anything change between the time of application and the review i.e. any type of changes that may affect the registered agency's substantial compliance with the ESG, the agency is expected to inform EQAR at the earliest convenience⁴.

⁴ See EQAR's policy on reporting changes <https://www.eqar.eu/register/guide-for-agencies/reporting-and-renewal/>

The following activities of the applicant are outside the scope of the ESG:

- Minimum criteria for election to the titles of higher education teacher, researcher and higher education associate at higher education institutions
- Advisory services

These activities are not relevant to the application for renewal on EQAR.

2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

This review will evaluate the extent to which SQAA continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support SQAA's application to EQAR. The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

2.1 Focus areas

A) Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the Register Committee's last renewal decision:
a. ESG 2.6 – Reporting;
b. ESG 3.4 – Thematic analysis;
c. ESG 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities: a. External (sample) evaluation of a study programme;

C) Standards affected by other types of substantive changes: n/a

D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;

E) Selected enhancement area: a. ESG 3.3 Independence

F) Other matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG (if any).

These issues should be investigated by the review panel as far as possible, providing an analysis and conclusion on the ESG standard(s) concerned.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted in line with the requirements of the EQAR Procedures for Applications and the Policy on Targeted Reviews, and following the methodology described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Agreement on the Terms of Reference between EQAR, SQAA and The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Self-assessment by SQAA including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to SQAA;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Analysis of the final review report and decision-making by the EQAR Register Committee;
- Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board;
- Attendance to the online follow-up seminar.

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to SQAA during the past 5 years, and conversely SQAA has not provided any remunerated or unremunerated services to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of 4 members including an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member and one other expert. At least two of the four members is from another country.

At least one panel member should be a quality assurance professional that is currently employed by a QA agency and has been engaged in quality assurance within the past five years.

When requested by the agency under review or when considered particularly pertinent, other stakeholders (for example, a representative of the labour market) may be included in addition to the four panel members. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and one as the review secretary. At least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. At least two panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency. Once appointed, The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) will inform EQAR about the appointed panel members.

3.3 Self-assessment by SQAA, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

SQAA is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

- a description of the self-assessment process and the production of the SAR;
- a description of changes occurred within the agency since the last full review, including any eventual changes in the higher education system and quality assurance system in which the agency predominantly operates, the agency's structure, funding, its list of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG, as well as the changes in the agency's quality assurance activities abroad (where relevant);
- a section that addresses the focus areas of the review, including standards that were considered to be partially compliant with the ESG in the last full review as well as ESG2.1 and one self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (see 2.1 Focus areas);

- a SWOT analysis of the agency as a whole;
- for each of the individual standards enlisted above (see section 2) a consideration of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/ renewal (if applicable).

The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which SQAA fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and continues to meet the ESG and thus the requirements for EQAR registration.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the review coordinator, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The coordinator will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule considering the aspects included under the focus area (as defined under point 2.1 of the Terms of Reference).

The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit. The approved schedule shall be given to SQAA at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The site visit should enable the review panel to explore how the agency has addressed the standards where it has been found to be partially compliant (if the case), aspects of substantive change, consideration of internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1) and the self-selected ESG standard(s) for enhancement. The panel will include extra time during the site-visit to address any other arising issues (if the case) that might have an impact on the agency's compliance with the ESG.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the agency.

Prior to the physical site visit, the panel attends a joint briefing call between the panel, The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and EQAR to clarify the review expectations and address any possible arising matters.

In advance of the site visit (at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR.⁴

The external report will present the facts and analysis reflecting the reality at the time of review. This will form the main basis for the Register Committee's decision making.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language. After panel has considered coordinator's feedback, the report will go to the agency for comment on factual accuracy. If SQAA chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report.

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by SQAA and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The European

⁴ See here: <https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg>.

Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) will provide to SQAA the Declaration of Honour together with the final report.

4. Publication and use of the report

SQAA will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Agency Review Committee has validated the report. Prior to the final validation of the report, the ENQA Agency Review Committee may request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome. The report will also be published on the EQAR website together with the decision on registration, regardless of the outcome.

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA.

5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA Membership

The agency will submit the review report via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency will also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), the Declaration of Honour and any other relevant documents to the application to EQAR (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report).

EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in Oct/Nov 20223 (tbc). The Register Committee's final judgement on the agency's compliance with the ESG as a whole can either be substantially compliant (approval of the application) or not substantially compliant (rejection of the application). In case of a positive decision (substantially compliant with the ESG), the registration is renewed for a further five years (from the date of the review report).

The decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board will take place after EQAR Register Committee decision.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on

the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	July 2022
Appointment of review panel members	Sept/Oct 2022 Department
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by SQAA	1 December 2022
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	Mid December 2022
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January 2023
Briefing of review panel members	End January 2023
Review panel site visit	Early March 2023
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	End April 2023
Factual check of the review report by the SQAA	May 2023
Statement of SQAA to review panel (if applicable)	May 2023
Submission of review report to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)	June 2023
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	End June/Oct 2023
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by SQAA	Oct/Nov 2023
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	December 2023

ANNEX 3: DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY SQAA

- SQAA self-evaluation report

DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATION REQUESTED BY THE PANEL AND PROVIDED BY THE SQAA

- A number of draft reports by experts in English language
- SQAA Work Plan for 2023
- Statistics on the newsletters and links to newsletters
- Statistics on regular meetings with stakeholders since 2018 and themes discussed (list of events and meetings, such as annual conferences)
- Statistics on the Director's visits to HEIs and themes discussed (list of visits and general themes that were discussed)
- New international cooperation resulting from the Director's visits to agencies abroad (list of what kind of cooperation was established as a result of these visits)
- A short contextual explanation on the Constitutional Court ruling that SAR mentioned was possibly endangering SQAA in the past (what was the issue)
- A list of which institutions that had undergone sample evaluations since 2019 as per p.18 of SAR
- Any evidence on how stakeholders appreciate the eNAKVIS, NAKVIS website, YouTube and Twitter – statistics, but also any communication about it
- In the previous ENQA review, the panel expected a more open and constructive dialogue with stakeholders (the Government and HEIs). SQAA responded so that the SQAA Council members are included in evaluators' training, evaluation of sample programmes, visits of HEIs with the Director, training of the new council members about their role, etc. Could you please provide some statistics and information on this, including how new Council members are trained?

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

- ENQA agency review report 2018
- EQAR Renewal of Registration 2018
- ENQA Reconfirmation of membership 2018
- SQAA Follow-up report from agency review by ENQA 2020
- ENQA letter on SQAA follow-up report for the 2018 ENQA review 2020
- ENQA response to New University about its complaint against SQAA sent to ENQA on 28 October 2020
- SQAA website
- SQAA YouTube channel

IV.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS

QUALITY ASSURANCE



*Elena Cirlan, ENQA Senior Policy and Project Coordinator
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QUALITY ASSURANCE OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS: **THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES**

INTRODUCTION

Micro-credentials are not new. Small units of learning offered outside the framework of full degree programmes have been part of the education landscape for many years. However, there has recently been a new impetus, including new terminology and definitions, increased policy focus on micro-credentials as a tool for upskilling and reskilling in the changing job market, and attempts to anchor micro-credentials in existing higher education frameworks, such as ECTS, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance¹, in order to facilitate their recognition, for purposes of employment and entry and/or progression in higher education. This comes as part of the current policy discourse around flexible learning paths and responsiveness

¹ See further MICROBOL project: <https://microbol.knowledgeinnovation.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2020/09/MICROBOL-Desk-Research-Report.pdf>.

of the labour market. In this context, the past five years have seen intensified work to develop national and European policies to address micro-credentials.

Quality assurance of any educational offer seeks to ensure that policies and practices are in place to ensure that it meets its intended aims and to support student success. As such, quality assurance needs to be fit-for-purpose and context sensitive, relating back to the reasons for offering micro-credentials in the first place. A 2015 study identified several reasons why higher education institutions may offer micro-credentials. These included increasing visibility and reputation, attracting a more diverse group of students, increasing responsiveness to the demands of students and the labour market, experimenting with new pedagogies, and generating revenue (Jansen and Schuwer, 2015, p.5).

Those motivations are still entirely valid for institutions, though others might be added, such as offering flexible learning paths, meeting national policy priorities, and as a collaboration mechanism with other organisations (within or outside high-

er education). What has perhaps shifted is that micro-credentials are more likely now to be a strategic choice for institutions, rather than an ad-hoc project. For learners, motivations may differ depending on whether they are an existing enrolled student at the higher education institution or an external learner, although factors such as professional development and personal interest are valid in both cases. One important point is that external learners are likely to be more diverse, which has significant implications for course design and approaches to student engagement.

Small units of learning have long been subject to some form of internal quality assurance, although not necessarily in a way that is strategic or embedded in institutional quality assurance for full degree programmes. However, the focus on external quality assurance of micro-credentials is a more recent development. It speaks to the role that external quality assurance plays in providing trust and transparency in the educational offer, serving both as a way to attract students and partners, as well as to offer confidence for learners and employers in the qualification gained.

QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORKS

Various fora² working on micro-credentials reached the conclusion that the existing Bologna Process tools, including the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), are also applicable to micro-credentials. In line with one of the ESG principles, the primary responsibility for the quality of provision lies with higher education institutions themselves (ESG, 2015, p. 7). Thus, external quality assurance should ensure that institutions offering micro-credentials have a reliable and

well-built system to monitor their quality internally. Most quality assurance agencies in the EHEA do not have and do not plan to develop a specific approach for the external quality assurance of micro-credentials but are instead reflecting on how the existing quality assurance frameworks and procedures may be used or adapted for micro-credentials. The agencies participating in the IMINQA study explained that developing and applying a separate approach is not pertinent because high-

² MICROBOL project (see previous footnote).

IMINQA project: https://www.ehea.info/Upload/IMINQA_MC_report_Approaches_to_Quality_Assurance_of_Micro_credentials.pdf

ENQA Working Group 'Quality assurance of micro-credentials': <https://www.enqa.eu/events/online-dissemination-event-external-quality-assurance-of-micro-credentials-27-september-2022/>

er education institutions, in most cases, have sound internal quality assurance systems and procedures that can also cover micro-credentials and because this would require a lot of human and other resources (Cirlan, 2023, p.17).

The MICROBOL project highlighted the importance of proportionality and recommended that programme level evaluation should not be encouraged for each micro-credential, as it is too elaborate for such small volumes of learning (MICROBOL, 2021, p. 4). It is also generally considered that programme level evaluation is unsuitable for micro-credentials because of the pace at which they are expected to be updated in order to respond to societal and learners' needs (MICROBOL, 2022, p.7).

Despite the reliance on existing internal and external quality assurance approaches, these may still need some adaptation to take into account the specificities of micro-credentials, to ensure that they remain learner-centred, and that they are in line with existing quality assurance standards. In this context, the role of quality assurance agencies is to support higher education institutions in developing policies and processes for quality assurance of micro-credentials and to assure the public and stakeholders of their effectiveness.

When courses or modules are taken from an existing study programme and offered as micro-credentials, they conceptually fall under the internal and external quality assurance of programmes (if the external quality assurance focuses also on one study programme at a time) and/or of the institution. When micro-credentials are offered as part of lifelong learning provision, these fall under the external quality assurance of the institution, which focuses on the internal quality assurance system covering the entire provision. It is noteworthy that not all quality assurance agencies evaluate whether the internal quality assurance system addresses lifelong learning provision but many plan to do so as part of

the institutional evaluation. On the other hand, the agencies that have a dedicated standard for lifelong learning as part of the external quality assurance of the institution, plan to address it more thoroughly or to revise it and include more criteria relevant to micro-credentials, covering issues such as stackability and portability.

Regarding alternative providers of micro-credentials (organisations that are not higher education organisations), most of the quality assurance agencies that participated in the IMINQA study reported that they do not plan to evaluate them nor their provision. The main reasons for this are lack of legal ground and mandate for agencies to do so, and/or the heavy workload it would create for the agency staff. However, the agencies agreed that it is beneficial for higher education institutions to partner with alternative providers when developing and offering micro-credentials, to make sure that the needs and expertise of employers are taken into account and to guarantee the quality of provision (Cirlan, 2023, p.18).

It is generally agreed that the external quality assurance procedures should be flexible and the regulation should be limited and light-touch to allow for creativity and innovation. This applies also to national legal frameworks, which are even more difficult to change and update. However, the choice of the external quality assurance approach for micro-credentials highly depends on the context of the higher education system, the remit of the quality assurance agency/agencies and the existence of other organisations covering some of the offerings, for example those of the alternative providers.

THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

When looking to develop or review their approach to the external quality assurance of micro-credentials, agencies may wish to explore the different roles that they can play, depending on their remit and operating context. The possible roles can be roughly grouped as: providers of external quality assurance of micro-credentials; providers of guidance and expert advice; facilitators of discussion and peer learning; and providers of public information (IMIN-QA, forthcoming).

It would be easy to assume that the primary function of agencies with regard to micro-credentials would be to offer external quality assurance procedures for micro-credentials. However, as noted above, very few agencies have taken this step, as it is generally not considered proportionate to the size of micro-credentials, either as individual units or overall in terms of the volume of learning opportunities offered by an institution. Instead, agencies tend to adapt existing approaches and criteria to ensure that the specificities of micro-credentials are adequately reflected, if this is relevant for the institution being evaluated. Currently, this is often done through pilot projects or small scale initiatives, before being expanded to cover the whole sector. Development of approaches that specifically consider micro-credentials highlights the accountability function of external quality assurance, providing confidence in the education and qualification received. However, this must be balanced with the need for flexibility, context-sensitivity and proportionality.

This role of agencies might be combined with that of providing public information about micro-credentials and how they are quality assured, although this function can also be fulfilled independently. Some countries are making efforts to develop databases or catalogues of micro-creden-

tials as a way of improving transparency and protecting learner interests. In addition to serving the higher education sector, these initiatives can also motivate alternative providers to align their micro-credential offerings with higher education frameworks, particularly if their purpose is to support access and progression in higher education.

In many countries, quality assurance agencies have played an expert role, giving input to the development of policies for micro-credentials. This occurs at different levels: at national and European level, to ensure that policy development takes into account the reality of implementing quality assurance; and at institutional level, to provide guidance and advice on how to adapt internal quality assurance approaches to also cover micro-credentials. This role recognises the position of quality assurance agencies as inter-locutors between policy and practice.

Finally, quality assurance agencies can also play a facilitation role in providing opportunities for peer learning and sharing of information. This might have different dimensions, such as bringing together higher education institutions to share practice on how they approach micro-credentials internally, or by convening a group of quality assurance agencies to discuss approaches and roles, as well as to share experience on challenging issues such as the quality assurance of micro-credentials offered by alternative providers.

These different roles demonstrate that all quality assurance agencies can engage in the discussions about micro-credentials, even if their national framework does not give them a remit to develop specific quality assurance approaches, or if their work is not anchored in any specific national framework.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the discussions with quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, conducted as part of various recent studies and initiatives, common themes have emerged regarding the quality assurance of micro-credentials, including transparency, flexibility, and proportionality. Quality assurance agencies can play a range of roles in ensuring that European, national and institutional approaches keep these issues in mind. While higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for the quality of their education provision, in line with the established principle of quality assurance in the EHEA, agencies can offer an additional layer of confidence that micro-credentials are designed and monitored in a way that applies existing EHEA tools in a proportionate manner and that ultimately supports student success and meets the needs of learners.

References

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v.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS

MICRO-CREDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT IN OECD COUNTRIES: **KEY FINDINGS FROM THE MICRO-CREDENTIAL IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT**

The interviewees, **Roza Gyorfi** and **Shizuka Kato** from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), were guests at the annual international conference of the agency held on 6 November 2023 on “Designing a QA model for micro-credentials.” The purpose of the event, which brought together a wide range of international and national experts in the field of micro-credentials, was to share experiences in this topical area and discuss the challenges that arise in the implementation of micro-credentials and the design of the most appropriate quality assurance systems in this field.

Nataša Kramar and Gregor Rebernik from NAKVIS interviewed them.

NAKVIS: *At the beginning, we would like to ask you for a brief overview of the OECD-EC Micro-credentials Implementation Project, especially the main objectives, and the anticipated benefits and outcomes from this project.*

Broadly speaking, the project aimed to provide technical assistance to EU Member States in developing national measures to implement the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. The main objectives were twofold. Firstly, strengthening the evidence base on the current and near-term potential of micro-credentials and related challenges, and secondly, outlining practical approaches and steps that EU Member States can take to deliver on that potential and address challenges.

So, when talking about the benefits for individual participating countries like Slovenia, participating in the project allowed the country to receive tailored analysis and advice based on the OECD's international expertise, fostering national and international discussion, participation in a peer learning event, as well as broader support for national and international stakeholder engagement. In some countries, we also provided advice to support the development of the national measures, but in Slovenia, those were quite advanced already. Thus, we offered more support and advice on how to effectively implement the planned initiatives as well as how to identify and remedy potential pitfalls.

When we talk about the main benefits for the broader OECD community, we would like to mention synthesising the international knowledge base about micro-credentials, their efficacy, and common challeng-

es. We also organised events to facilitate international peer learning, and through this, we identified a number of best practices in member states. The expectation was that through these, OECD countries become better equipped to respond to overall policy challenges, which micro-credentials broadly relate to, most notably the digital and green transitions.

The project had six key outputs. A concise guidance paper titled "Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability: Uses and Possibilities"³ was published in March 2023, which was followed by an online international knowledge exchange workshop. A series of national stakeholder workshops were then organised in four countries that participated in the project, namely Finland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain. At the moment (at the time of this interview), we are focusing on a two-part series of summary papers⁴: the first on European and international trends in general, and the second focusing on case studies of the four participating countries. The first paper also includes a self-assessment tool that countries can use to facilitate micro-credential policy implementation. The last output will be a webinar sometime in early 2024.

NAKVIS: *Which are the key insights and challenges that have emerged and could be relevant to Slovenia's approach to micro-credentials?*

We would like to start with the definition of micro-credentials because having a shared understanding is crucial. The OECD provides a broad definition with three key characteristics. Compared to traditional degree programmes, micro-credentials are smaller in volume, more targeted in terms of skills or study topics, and more flexible

³ OECD (2023), "Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability: Uses and possibilities", OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 66, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9c4b7b68-en>.

⁴ OECD (2023), "Public policies for effective micro-credential learning", OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 85, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a41f148b-en>.

OECD (2023), "Micro-credential policy implementation in Finland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Spain", OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 86, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c3daa488-en>.

in delivery. They are typically seen as a tool to complement conventional forms of education and training and can result in stand-alone qualifications or be embedded in broader learning pathways that can support educational advancement, employment and wage improvement, or personal growth. Such a broad definition allows for the inclusion of already existing shorter programmes under the micro-credentials umbrella. When discussing volume, we observe that different national systems have different upper and lower ECTS limits, ranging from 1 ECTS as the lowest to 60 ECTS as the highest. When we talk specifically about Slovenia, the development of the national definition seems to be one of your major concerns.

Concerning development, we identify two types of micro-credential offerings in the OECD and G20 countries: independent offerings, where Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offer micro-credentials on their own, and offerings in partnerships with other stakeholders. Many traditional shorter programmes are based on existing offerings and might result from unbundling degree programmes. In this project, we focused more on those cases where shorter programmes are offered in partnerships with employers or other stakeholders, which we believe is more relevant for Slovenia as well.

NAKVIS: So, the OECD doesn't intend to develop any further guidelines regarding the more concrete structure of micro-credentials but leaves this authority to the countries themselves?

We need to keep in mind that the national context is always very particular. What works in Portugal won't necessarily work in Slovenia, and what works in Slovenia may not work in Italy. Different contexts, legislative traditions, etc., vary, so the OECD isn't planning to prepare definitive guidelines. However, one of the aforementioned deliverables of our project is the set of indicators, which will be part of the final paper

and will serve as a self-assessment tool for policymakers in different countries. It is supposed to help policymakers think holistically about all the challenges related to developing a functioning national micro-credential ecosystem, including defining optimal regulations and guidelines, and ensuring that all relevant stakeholders have a clear idea of the concept and objectives.

At this stage, some countries are developing non-legally binding guidelines (such as Australia, the province of British Columbia in Canada, Malaysia and New Zealand), and others are going further by enacting legislative changes (e.g. Spain). It is possible that more countries will move towards enacting legislative changes as their micro-credential experiments mature. Then there are countries where the government supports collaborative efforts of providers to standardise micro-credential design. This served as the foundation for the creation of a national framework that can later possibly be reflected in legislation but started as a framework agreed amongst providers (such as Ireland and the Netherlands).

Another observation made regarding the size of micro-credentials was that shorter programmes, in general, can be helpful in quickly correcting minor skill deficits. However, longer programmes appear to be more successful at helping adults make greater career changes or redirect their careers. The national definitions of micro-credentials tend to be set to accommodate both types of programmes. In countries moving towards a stricter definition, the rationale often is to differentiate micro-credentials from already existing shorter educational provisions. For example, in Slovenia, there are already supplementary study programmes (študijski programi za izpopolnjevanje). In Spain, a recent Royal Decree differentiates between micro-credentials and the pre-existing non-degree programmes. The question for Slovenia is how to position micro-credentials in relation to existing short programmes, which

appear to be quite established and specific to certain uses, such as teacher education or supporting specific occupations.

A third observation we made was that many recent initiatives in different countries emphasise industry relevance and stackability. Some countries opt for a stronger steering approach, while others emphasise encouragement. For example, in some countries, accreditation might depend on the involvement or endorsement of employers or industry partners, while in others, the funding mechanism might be tied to endorsement from industry partners.

NAKVIS: *We find it interesting that different countries develop different definitions for micro-credentials, but it's even more interesting that different stakeholders have taken the initiative to develop these definitions. In your opinion, which is the appropriate institution that should, let's say, take the lead in this regard? Is it the Ministry? We noticed that in one instance, universities developed the definition, while in another, it could be the National Quality Assurance Agency. What is your opinion on this?*

The OECD cannot say with certainty who should take the lead because we want to respect the national context and allow the country to decide on the best approach. We wouldn't say there's one single approach, but as you mentioned, in some countries, the quality assurance agency leads this process. In New Zealand, for example, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority set the definition and developed the guidelines, and universities follow that framework even though they have a self-accrediting status. So, their guidelines work as a national framework for all accredited education providers (including some alternative providers). A similar case exists in Malaysia, where the Malaysian Qualifications Agency developed the guidelines. In other cases, such as Australia, Canada, and Spain, the government prepared the framework. In

Ireland and the Netherlands, universities themselves are working on developing their frameworks as part of their pilot work, and then it's up to policymakers to decide on the way forward and how to formalise the findings or the framework developed through collaborative efforts.

We believe that Slovenia would benefit from having more discussions among smaller groups consisting of those involved in the pilot project led by the ministry and other key stakeholders such as NAKVIS. You could discuss and decide together on the various aspects mentioned before and formulate a recommendation for the ministry together. Slovenia has the advantage of being a small enough country to bring together many relevant stakeholders, thereby lending itself to a very collaborative approach similar to what we have seen in the Netherlands. Through this, you could move towards a more shared understanding of micro-credentials.

NAKVIS: *What do you think are the critical success factors for implementing a micro-credentials system from the agency's point of view, and where do you see our role?*

There are two major points to consider: the lower risks associated with micro-credentials and the importance of keeping quality assurance mechanisms agile and flexible. Effective quality assurance involves striking the right balance to mitigate the risks of poor-quality programmes while also accounting for constraints that QA systems themselves hold. QA can be very costly and time-consuming both for agencies and education providers, and it may take some time to arrive at the right procedure. However, it should be kept in mind that micro-credentials need to be developed quickly to respond to emerging needs.

When we talk about the lower risks compared to degree programmes, it's important to note that micro-credentials are shorter in duration. If providers charge

fees, or fees are covered by public authorities, they can be lower. This means that we don't necessarily have to apply the same standards or the same system to micro-credentials as we do to degree programmes. To keep the quality assurance system agile and flexible, agencies can give institutions the authority to offer programmes and take responsibility. In some cases, as seen in Estonia, Ireland, and New Zealand, QA agencies take different approaches to different providers. Sometimes universities or other formal education providers have increased autonomy, while other providers need to go through programme accreditation. In Estonia, they also use a field-specific quality assessment approach, whereby quality assessments and the accreditation they provide are specific to a particular field of study and once an HEI has the right to offer programmes in a certain field, they can also offer micro-credentials within that field.

Regarding the next steps for Slovenia, we recommend conducting a pilot quality evaluation of micro-credentials, similar to what Estonia, Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom have done. They conducted pilots on the quality assurance of micro-credentials before establishing standards. You may want to check the reports on micro-credentials from the ENQA Working Group and the IMINQA project, where they also include case studies. It is important to test your planned institutional approach, including with institutions that are not part of the pilot project.

NAKVIS: *How do you think institutions in Slovenia can collaborate with the industry in the best way so that micro-credentials will address the needs of the job market?*

Based on findings from previous projects over the course of the last 10 years, we already see a change in Slovenia. The ministry and the government have been working on making higher education programmes more relevant to the broader environment. As part of the micro-credential pilot, we spoke with all four participating

HEIs, and some of them are very focused on responding to the needs of industries. The next step would be to provide more incentives or just create the basis for institutions through which they can offer programmes that are relevant to the environment. We understand that legislation is going to include lifelong learning as one of the missions, which would help and encourage Slovenian institutions to have it as one of their core missions as well.

One barrier is that hiring teachers from industry is challenging under the current legislation. If universities offer very academic programmes, it becomes more difficult to prepare graduates immediately for the labour market. It is quite challenging for academic staff to suddenly change the focus of their programmes. Consequently, it is beneficial to bring somebody from industry as a part-time lecturer to give students an overview of what's needed in the labour market. You may want to consider allowing teachers or lecturers from industry to be part of the micro-credential initiative. This way, the industry will have more chances to know what's happening in the higher education sector. In some countries, it's mandated to have employer engagement or evidence of need from industry as part of the pilot. In Australia, for instance, they are also conducting a national pilot, and participating institutions or institutions receiving funding have to show evidence of industry support for their project. It's a stricter approach compared to stating that micro-credentials should be labour market-relevant, but it's up to institutions to decide what they do.

We observe that in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, they are more labour market-oriented. In the Netherlands, for instance, VET providers and industry partners jointly develop programme proposals for shorter courses. While this may not immediately apply to HEIs due to their different nature, it could be an example to consider in making programmes more labour market relevant.

NAKVIS: Have you encountered any examples of innovative approaches for funding micro-credentials?

As part of the survey conducted by the OECD within a related ongoing project, we also asked about the funding support available to providers. Approximately, two-thirds of the 29 responding jurisdictions mentioned having some form of public funding support for HEIs to offer micro-credentials or similar types of short programmes.

In Finland, for instance, the provision of open studies (modules of degree programmes) is considered part of the core public funding to HEIs. In this way, universities are incentivised to be more involved in continuous learning, although not necessarily in offering new micro-credential programmes.

Austria, France, Scotland, and other jurisdictions, are also developing or have developed individual learning accounts to support upskilling, reskilling, and lifelong learning. In France, a wide range of individuals receive a fixed amount of money for the purpose of training every year. Meanwhile, in Austria and Scotland, they target specific populations, such as those without higher education or those with lower incomes and provide them with specific funds for upskilling and reskilling.

NAKVIS: What about the technology and online learning platforms? What role do they play?

It's essential to differentiate between digital tools used more generally for teaching and learning and information portals, in particular. Broadly speaking about digital teaching tools, these are not specific to micro-credentials, but they are highly applicable. They offer advantages by integrating new tools into higher education, allowing more people to participate and programmes to be more flexible. However, we must recognise that digital teaching and

learning require a distinct quality assurance methodology. It's not simply a matter of transferring offline teaching to online; we need to be aware of the advantages and limitations of the format, necessitating a change in methodology. One such limitation is that it's more challenging to keep learners engaged, requiring additional support over the long term.

Regarding information portals, significant development has occurred in this area in recent years. These portals should serve as good starting points for individuals to explore the various offerings in institutions and they can be developed and maintained by different organisations. What all of these portals have in common is that they aim to be a starting point. In some countries, it's a government initiative, such as in Australia, while in others, it's a joint initiative of education providers. Some portals focus specifically on one type of provider. In Germany, for example, the German Rectors' Conference developed a portal that lists all further education offerings of public and government-recognised HEIs across the country, including information on different learning types or some potential funding sources for these programmes. We think this is relevant for Slovenia as well, since your country has a lot of information on adult learning in various places. Still, there hasn't been a national-level synthesis for offerings of HEIs and micro-credentials. Having such a centralised platform is crucial to raising awareness about these programmes among prospective learners.

NAKVIS: Lastly, we would like to know if you have encountered any considerations for ensuring the accessibility of disadvantaged and underrepresented populations to micro-credentials.

This is undoubtedly an important objective of the project. In the paper published last March ("Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability: Uses and Possibilities"), there is a section that examines evidence regarding micro-credentials and

their potential to support disadvantaged learners. This topic is increasingly prevalent in post-discussions across OECD countries. Again, there is a significant national context involved because disadvantaged learners vary widely from one country to another, and one must consider the specific hurdles they face. Addressing this is not easy, so it's challenging to say that anyone has completely addressed it. This is evident in the data across the European Union, where those with lower-level education and lower socio-economic indicators are less likely to participate in lifelong learning. Often, they either seem unaware of it or don't recognise the need for it. One of the key considerations is communication. Having a starting point: a website or portal is crucial. It is also important to ensure that people who don't typically search the internet for upskilling and reskilling opportunities can learn about the offers and the available support. Because if they don't hear about it, they won't engage in it. So, one must put the information in their way.

Another consideration is financial resources when fees are involved. In Slovenia you have a well-funded public higher education system, and many assume that education is free, making paying fees less appealing for many. Even when they do, one must be mindful of the strain that fees can put on the incomes of specific disadvantaged groups, including indirect financial costs such as travel or study materials. For online courses, there's still a need for decent ICT equipment and infrastructure. Non-finan-

cial factors also play a role: people need to have sufficient time that is free of other responsibilities, such as childcare and elderly care, and they need to have it at the right time slots which can require explicit employer support. Indications show that employer support is crucial for people finding the time and energy to engage in lifelong learning. Those lacking specific employer support are less likely to complete or even start a lifelong learning opportunity. Encouraging employers to be more supportive is possible through cultural changes aimed at making employers understand that employees need time for this. There are also possibilities for tax incentives or absentee pay, as seen in Singapore, where employers get reimbursed for the employee's salary during continuous learning.

Returning to the theme of communication, a niche example, which perhaps is not the most relevant for Slovenia but can still illustrate well how to approach a specific group: in Germany, an NGO focuses on providing education programs specifically for refugees and displaced persons. To reach these specific populations, they tailored their communication to the channels used by refugees and displaced persons, chiefly phone apps and collaborating with, and getting organisations trusted by these groups to share information about their programmes.

In conclusion, adjusting the style of communications for disadvantaged and under-represented populations is essential.





VI.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS

PERFORMANCE

Nataša Kramar, Gregor Rebernik (NAKVIS)

DESIGNING A QA MODEL FOR MICRO-CREDENTIALS

Slovenia's strategic approach to higher education aligns with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Commission policies. This alignment is reflected in the emphasis on lifelong learning and adapting the education system to be more flexible and responsive. The Slovenian National Programme of Higher Education to the year 2030 serves as a key strategic document, aiming to enhance the quality of higher education through various approaches. A critical aspect of this strategy is the integration of microcredentials, which are designed to offer short, focused, and directly applicable learning opportunities for both personal development and workplace relevance. It places a significant emphasis on promoting lifelong learning, including the adoption and recognition of micro-credentials, and acknowledging the need for individuals to acquire diverse, high-quality knowledge and skills throughout their working lives.

In the coming article, we will be focusing on the role of quality assurance in this process, while taking into account the insights we gathered from the traditional annual conference on quality the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) organized in November 2023 to enhance our understanding of the matter, with the development of a quality assurance framework for micro-credentials being the main focus this time around.

THE FORMAL INCLUSION OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS IN SLOVENIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation (the ministry) in Slovenia launched an important project in this regard in 2022 in order to integrate micro-credentials into public higher education by 2025. As part of the project to reform higher education for a green and resilient transition the pilot project aims to formalize the inclusion of microcredentials in Slovenian public higher education institutions by 2025, facilitating a more responsive approach to societal changes and the labour market's demand for a highly skilled workforce.

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This initiative aims to enhance the accessibility and relevance of education for a broad spectrum of learners, including working professionals, job seekers, lifelong learners and even current students. This project mirrors the European Commission's focus on flexible learning paths through micro-credentials. However, challenges remain, particularly in determining how to incorporate micro-credentials into the Slovenian Qualifications Framework. To address these challenges effectively, stakeholder discussions involving educators, industry representatives, and policymakers are essential. The mentioned conference is one of the first, important steps in this direction.

THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS

SQAA sees itself as an important partner of the ministry in this process – especially in building the quality assurance system for microcredentials in Slovenia. Of course, some ground rules have to be established first, since the definition and structure of micro-credentials pose challenges, requiring a compromise within the national context before establishing a suitable quality assurance system. Notably, the existing tradition of supplementary study programs in Slovenia raises questions about the interpretation of these programs as larger micro-credentials. Similar inquiries arise when considering the unbundling of current programs into micro-credentials, prompting discussions on their efficacy and purpose. Addressing issues of delivery mode, assessment methods, and structure are also essential for the successful implementation of micro-credentials.

Some ground rules have to be established first, since the definition and structure of microcredentials pose challenges, requiring a compromise within the national context before establishing a suitable quality assurance system.

On the other hand, the need for a more personalized, flexible, and student-oriented approach necessitates careful consideration of teaching methods and the minimum size of micro-credentials. Furthermore, the concept of stackability, a potential ambition of micro-credentials, requires the establishment of rules and guidelines to prevent the mere quantitative accumulation of credits from leading to a full degree. The common understanding and solutions to these issues are crucial, to ensure that the quality system we build around micro-credentials in Slovenia is indeed credible, valuable and fit for purpose.

CONFERENCE INSIGHTS: THE PROGRESS, ISSUES AND VISION OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS

The SQAA conference was an important opportunity to address these issues and to share experiences and transferable practices on the matter. The conference brought together a diverse group of experts to discuss the implementation, challenges, and potentials of micro-credentials. Discussions revealed that in many European countries, there is still no specific national framework for micro-credentials, highlighting a gap that the whole EHEA aims to fill in the near future. Special emphasis was placed on the importance of collaboration among educational institutions, industry, and policymakers, while challenges - such as establishing a standardized framework and ensuring recognition and transferability of micro-credentials - were the key discussion points.

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The expert presentations included representatives from important higher education and quality assurance institutions and organizations. The presenters addressed how higher education institutions are creating micro-credentials in diverse forms, while at the same time discussed government responses to micro-credential development, highlighting the importance of regulations, public funding, quality assurance mechanisms, and information systems. Questions were raised on the impact of these small focused learning units on the broader educational landscape.

ESTABLISHING A ROBUST AND FLEXIBLE QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

The fact remains that in many European countries, specific frameworks for micro-credentials don't (yet) exist, while specific quality assurance standards are only the next step in the process. Significant gaps are also identified in careers guidance, learner support information, internal QA processes, and outcomes data for micro-credentials, emphasizing the need for a more structured approach to their implementation and evaluation. Experts placed special importance on establishing a robust and flexible quality assurance framework tailored to micro-credentials, a crucial step for their wider acceptance and integration into formal education systems, while at the same time noting the applicability of the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) to micro-credentials.

Experts placed special importance on establishing a robust and flexible quality assurance framework tailored to micro-credentials, a crucial step for their wider acceptance and integration into formal education systems, while at the same time noting the applicability of the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) to micro-credentials.

The roundtable discussions at the conference provided valuable insights into the practical aspects and implementation strategies of micro-credentials as seen by the Slovenian higher education institutions themselves. These discussions highlighted the development of various micro-credentials focusing on areas such as digital skills, sustainable development, and entrepreneurship, tailored to meet specific labour market needs and personal development goals. This approach reflects naturally matches a broader European trend, where micro-credentials are increasingly recognized as essential tools for lifelong learning and innovation, but at the same time reflects some of the specifics of the Slovenian higher education area and its deficiency areas.

NATIONAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

The growing global significance of micro-credentials was well-advertised and underscored during the discussion. Over 70 diverse micro-credentials are being developed in Slovenia, with development approaches varying from direct collaboration with the economy to higher education institutions identifying labour market needs or focusing on personal development.

One of the global trends is the digitalisation and the development of "online" micro-credentials, but that is not yet evident in the Slovenian higher education area, as identified by the representatives of the ministry. The mentioned existing project of the ministry is coming to an end in 2025, by which time HEIs should have the first feedback from learners of the pilot micro-credentials. Discussions also covered the integration of

micro-credentials into the national qualifications' framework, necessitating legislative changes and addressing issues like lecturer qualifications and financing after pilot projects.

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Universities shared their strategies for creating micro-credentials, focusing on European and local needs, despite the current lack of a formal national framework. The discussions again highlighted the need for formal recognition and the importance of distinguishing between lifelong learning and micro-credentials. The significance of a unified system complementing traditional higher education was also emphasized. The ministry plans to introduce a guide on micro-credentials in the near future. This should provide a sufficient framework to work with and at the same time at least partly address the current issues higher education institutions are faced with.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Some institutions have already started to develop their own quality systems beforehand, based on the possibility of self-accreditation of individual micro-credentials and on regular self-evaluation, which will allow for rapid adaptability to societal and employment needs. Slovenian higher education area – including the regulatory bodies – agree that institutions themselves should be responsible for the accreditation of micro-credentials within the frameworks of their internal quality assurance processes. The role of the agency in this regard is still to be defined, but SQAA is actively contemplating the development of a fit-for-purpose quality assurance system that will benefit all the important stakeholders and ensure transparency and comparability. External quality assurance options include assessing micro-credentials within the reaccreditation framework of higher education institutions, either through self-evaluation of existing study programs or as a result of a connection to the industry.

Slovenian higher education area – including the regulatory bodies – agree that institutions themselves should be responsible for the accreditation of micro-credentials within the frameworks of their internal quality assurance processes.

The institutions are aware of the intent and focus of micro-credentials and are actively identifying specific needs across various domains - from business studies to computing - and developing corresponding lifelong learning programs. A key aspect of this initiative is the emphasis on differentiating between lifelong learning and micro-credentials. Lifelong learning encompasses a broader scope of continuous education, whereas micro-credentials are focused, shorter-term educational achievements that cater to specific skill sets or knowledge areas. The flexibility and adaptability of quality assurance systems for these micro-credentials are being highlighted as essential for their success and acceptance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUOUS COLLABORATION

The proposed unified system of micro-credentials aims to complement and enhance traditional higher education. This system focuses on offering relevant, trustworthy, and agile educational programs that align with the latest trends and market needs. Ensuring the relevance and applicability of these credentials is crucial, and as such, close collaboration between higher education institutions and the business sector is being fostered. Feedback from stakeholders, including industry representatives and students, is being actively sought to ensure that the micro-credentials deliver valuable and relevant competencies. The discussions also underscore the importance of addressing potential conflicts of interest and maintaining data confidentiality, especially when designing credentials in partnership with external organizations.

Feedback from stakeholders, including industry representatives and students, is being actively sought to ensure that the micro-credentials deliver valuable and relevant competencies.

In conclusion, the development and integration of micro-credentials in Slovenian higher education represent a strategic response to the dynamic needs of the labour market and society. This approach aims to provide flexible, relevant, and targeted learning opportunities, enhancing the employability and skill sets of students and professionals alike. The collaboration between universities, government, industry, and the agency is pivotal in shaping an effective and responsive educational framework that aligns with both national and global educational trends. The Conference, enriched with insights from various experts and informative discussions, offered a comprehensive overview of Slovenia's progressive steps in embracing micro-credentials, while at the same time pinpoints the specific issues that not only trouble our local but European micro-credential context as well.

The collaboration between universities, government, industry, and the agency is pivotal in shaping an effective and responsive educational framework that aligns with both national and global educational trends.

BALANCING REGULATION AND FLEXIBILITY

The Agency plans to conduct pilot evaluations of micro-credentials in 2024, collaborating with stakeholders, especially higher education institutions, to test methodologies and find answers to some of these pertinent questions. The goal is to gather valuable insights, which can even lead to potential changes in legislation. Discussions are ongoing about establishing a common point, such as a portal or registry, for stakeholders to access information on micro-credentials, while the Agency also eagerly awaits the development of the guidelines that will hopefully strike a balance between necessary regulation and flexibility within the system of micro-credentials.



ABBREVIATIONS

BFUG – Bologna Follow-up Group
CEENQA – Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

Criteria for Experts – Criteria for Experts of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Criteria for the accreditation – Criteria for the Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes

DEQAR – Database of External Quality Assurance Results

eNakvis – External Information System of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

iNakvis – Internal Information System of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

ECA – European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

ENQA – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ESG – Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

ESU – European Student Union

EQAR – European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

HE – Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institution

INQAAHE – International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

SAR – Self-assessment Report

SEG – Self-evaluation Group

SQAA – Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency

VTI – Higher Transnational Education

QA – Quality Assurance

ZViS – Higher Education Act

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (NAKVIS/SQAA). 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.



SQAA is a 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
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