
ENQA AGENCY REVIEW: Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2018, the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) in Ljubljana (Slovenia) underwent an external review coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). SQAA has been a member of ENQA since March 2015, and is reapplying for renewal of membership. The agency also wants to apply for renewal of its listing in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). It has been an EQAR member since 2013.

This external review report is the outcome of the review process based on the SQAA's self-assessment report and a panel assessment including a site visit in Ljubljana. A review panel appointed by ENQA evaluated the way in which and to what extent SQAA fulfils the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The panel analysed all activities considered to be within the scope of the ESG, both within and outside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), whether those are obligatory or voluntary. The panel also took into account progress made since the 2015 review and issues put forward by EQAR when admitting SQAA to the register.

In the period under review (2016 and 2017), SQAA has made considerable progress in various areas. First, the agency has reached a commendable level of acceptance amongst its stakeholders. SQAA's status and standing have improved as evidenced in the various meetings and documents, and by the budgetary stability. Second, a major and positive step is the shift from programme to institutional accreditation. The new system recognises and supports the autonomy and the responsibility of HEIs for their internal quality assurance at programme level. Third, the SQAA staff is considered a valued asset. It managed large numbers of procedures, the implementation of a digital information system after many delays, and extensive training sessions for experts. Finally, the panel fully supports the management's renewed focus on the further development of the agency's internal quality assurance. Reorganisation plans are on the way creating additional staff positions, reviewing the expert pool, and reinforcing the autonomy of the agency, possibly by a new act, amongst other thoughts and ideas.

The panel acknowledges that SQAA faced a number of challenges when undergoing the 2018 review. The last review was largely based on plans; the present review includes the implementation of these plans. SQAA also needed to adopt the 2015 ESG, and this was done in a relatively short time. Lastly, the recent introduction of the new accreditation system in itself poses significant challenges.

Assessing SQAA's compliance with the ESG, the panel found that in many instances the involvement of both internal and external stakeholders could be improved. The position of students and of the council in particular need proper attention. An effective and complete commitment of *all* stakeholders is called for if the new quality assurance system is meant to be a success. SQAA should ensure that the adopted methodologies are fit for purpose, and should be willing to revise them to better accommodate the stakeholders' needs. Furthermore, the panel has come across incidents that showed that the independence of the agency is not always fully understood by the Slovenian authorities; the panel finds that any interference from the government should be avoided. Another concern of the panel relates to matters of transparency in criteria, reports, outcomes, decisions including appeals, follow-up procedures and complaints. Finally, the panel noticed a few recurring issues which need further attention such as the regular publication of thematic analyses and the continuous enhancement of the quality of the agency's work.

The panel concludes that SQAA complies with the ESG. The panel finds the agency to be fully compliant with three standards, substantially compliant with eight standards and partially compliant with three standards.

The level of compliance for each ESG is as follows:

Fully compliant

- 3.2 Official status
- 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies
- 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

Substantially compliant

- 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance
- 3.3 Independence
- 3.5 Resources
- 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose
- 2.3 Implementing processes
- 2.4 Peer-review experts
- 2.5 Criteria for outcomes
- 2.7 Complaints and appeals

Partially compliant

- 3.4 Thematic analysis
- 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct
- 2.6 Reporting

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije za kakovost v visokem šolstvu, SQAA/NAKVIS) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted from April 2018 until September 2018.

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, in order to verify that they act in substantial compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

SQAA has been registered on EQAR since 2013 following the positive outcomes of an external review. Having undergone another external review in 2014, SQAA became member of ENQA in 2015. Soon afterwards, SQAA applied for a third external review to be coordinated by ENQA. Following this review, the agency seeks renewal of both the EQAR registration (valid until July 2018) and the ENQA membership (valid until March 2020). In doing so, the time duration of the ENQA membership and EQAR registration can be aligned.

As this is SQAA's third review, the panel is expected to provide clear evidence of results in all areas and to acknowledge progress from the previous review. The panel has adopted a developmental approach, as the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* aim at constant enhancement of the agencies.

The SQAA core activities are listed in the self-assessment report (SAR), the ENQA Terms of Reference (Annex 2), and the EQAR confirmation of eligibility (Brussels, 8 December 2017). Within the scope of ESG are the following activities:

1. Initial accreditation and re-accreditation of higher education institutions (HEI);
2. Accreditation of new study programmes;
3. Accreditation of external evaluations;
4. External evaluation and extraordinary evaluation of HEI and of study programmes and evaluation of a sample of study programmes (at least 2% of all accredited study programmes shall be evaluated each year);
5. Notifications of internationally accredited joint study programmes and notification of study programmes of the International Association of universities – EMUNI;
6. Transnational higher education/cross-border education.

Furthermore, the external review report should also address the implementation of the European approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes as well as (if the case) how SQAA's ensures that the decisions taken on the basis of reviews carried out by other agencies are in line with the ESG, especially in case the agency is not registered on EQAR.

EQAR confirms that two activities are not separate quality assurance activities, but they might be relevant to SQAA's regular quality assurance activities:

1. Accreditation of various changes to HEIs: a monitoring or follow-up activity should be addressed as part of SQAA's accreditation or evaluation procedure;
2. Periodic training of the agency's expert evaluators: this activity might be relevant in relation to ESG 2.4.

The review covers the standards in the ESG parts 2 and 3, and differentiates between types of activities when relevant. For reasons of efficiency, the panel regrouped SQAA's activities in three main areas: the external evaluation and accreditation of (a) programmes and (b) HEIs in Slovenia, and (c) international activities. HEIs refer to both universities and vocational colleges unless stated otherwise.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2015 REVIEW

Three years ago, SQAA underwent its second external review against the ESG 2005. Upon receipt of the 2015 external review report, ENQA agreed to grant SQAA full membership of ENQA for five years from that date. The panel also made recommendations, which SQAA adequately addressed in the 2017 progress report¹ as confirmed by ENQA². The previous review identified three main areas for improvement: the further development of a joint understanding and interpretation of criteria and regulation among stakeholders; the follow-up of the reviews conducted by SQAA and the introduction of a proper follow-up instrument; the financial sustainability of the agency.

The level of compliance with the ESG 2005 for each ESG is as follows:

Fully compliant

- 2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures
- 2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes
- 2.4 Processes fit for purpose
- 2.7 Periodic reviews
- 2.8 System wide analyses
- 3.2 Official status
- 3.3 Activities
- 3.6 Independence
- 3.8 Accountability procedures

Substantially compliant

- 2.3 Criteria for decisions
- 2.5 Reporting
- 2.6 Follow-up procedures
- 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education
- 3.5 Mission statement
- 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies

Partially compliant

- 3.4 Resources

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2018 external review of SQAA was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the external review of SQAA was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- **Jean-Marc Rapp PhD (chair)**, President of Swiss Accreditation Council, Professor at the University of Lausanne, Law Faculty, Director of the Business Law Center, Switzerland [EUA nominee];

¹ SQAA Follow-up Report; Ljubljana, 28 February 2017

² ENQA Letter; Dublin, 8 June 2017

- **Michèle Wera MA (secretary)**, Policy advisor Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), the Netherlands [ENQA nominee];
- **Mirko Savić PhD**, Full Professor at Faculty of Economics and Centre for Applied Statistics, University of Novi Sad, Member of Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA), Serbia [ENQA nominee];
- **Marija Vasilevska BA**, Master's student at Iustinianus Primus Law Faculty, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, Macedonia [ESU nominee].

The original SAR was based on SQAA's *Quality Manual*. At ENQA's request, SQAA revised the document so that it would be in line with the ENQA Guidelines and follow the provided Guide of Content for SAR. In April 2018, the panel received the final version of the SAR. Via e-mail, the panel exchanged comments, formulated questions and agreed upon the programme for the site visit.

ENQA organised a preparatory videoconference briefing for the panel (7 May 2018) providing additional information on the procedure. Prior to the site visit, the review secretary had regular contact with the SQAA liaison officer and the ENQA coordinator.

During a four-day site visit in Ljubljana (10-13 June 2018), the panel met with management, staff, students, HEIs, the Minister of Education and other stakeholders. These interviews in 15 different sessions offered many opportunities to discuss and verify the findings in the SAR, and to gather more specific evidence. The panel appreciated the open discussions in the interviews and the readiness to provide additional documents. At the end of the visit, the panel passed judgement on compliance for each ESG as the outcome of the closed panel discussions. Scores used are fully, substantially, partially compliant or non-compliant. A final de-briefing meeting with SQAA completed the site visit. In this meeting, the chair gave the panel's overall impressions of the review.

The external review report describes the outcomes of the review including the evidence, an analysis and the conclusion for each ESG separately. The report includes the panel's commendations and recommendations. It also covers the progress made since the 2015 review, and the issues marked by EQAR when SQAA was admitted to the Register.

All panel members contributed to the writing process. After agreement of the review chair (9 July 2018), the report was submitted to ENQA for a last check. The final draft of the external review report (18 July 2018) was sent to Ljubljana for comment on factual accuracy (23 July 2018). After revision of the report following the comments of the agency (7 September 2018), the review chair submitted the final report (15 September 2018) to ENQA.

The panel noted that SQAA used the extended time between the panel's submission of the draft report and the agency's response also for implementing improvements following the panel's observations and recommendations. This is positive in itself but does not justify the late response. Furthermore, according to ENQA regulations the panel did not take into account these new developments and documents when finalising its report.

During the review process, the panel was assisted by Agnė Grajauskienė, ENQA Reviews Manager and ENQA coordinator of the SQAA review.

Self-assessment report

The SAR covers the period under review (2016 and 2017) and deals primarily with SQAA's two main activities being the external evaluation and accreditation of both programmes and HEIs. Information in the SAR on the third activity (the international activities) is limited, mainly due to the number of applications in that area being limited to three (SAR, p. 19). The SAR is posted on the SQAA's website, both in English and Slovenian.

The panel has quite some observations to make about the SAR, both about the procedure and the content. As the SAR is the direct result of the agency's internal quality assurance system, the panel refers for its appraisal to ESG 3.6.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY³

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

In 1999, Slovenia joined the Bologna process and decided to gradually restructure its higher education system. The first Bologna study programmes were offered in 2005/2006. The pre-Bologna study programmes finished in 2016.

According to the Act Amending the Higher Education Act (HEA)⁴, the higher education system in Slovenia provides:

1. a short-cycle vocational or professional education programmes (EQF 5; usually 120 ECTS);
2. first-cycle (undergraduate) programmes equivalent to a bachelor's programme, both higher professional and academic education (EQF 6; 180 to 240 ECTS);
3. a second-cycle (graduate) programmes equivalent to a master's programme, both higher professional and academic education (EQF 7; 60 to 120 ECTS);
4. lastly, a third cycle for doctorate programmes (EQF 8; 180 ECTS).

The official language of higher education is Slovenian. Some programmes may be offered in a foreign language.

The SAR lists three public universities, three private universities, one international association of universities, 42 private HEIs and 43 higher vocational colleges. All HEIs, both public and private, must be accredited in order to confer degrees. Universities are autonomous HEIs in the fields of science-research, art and education. They are multi-disciplinary institutions composed of faculties, art academies and higher vocational colleges.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The SAR defines the following milestones in the development of the external quality assurance system in higher education in Slovenia:

1994 – The Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia (the Council) was installed by law as an independent professional body of experts. The council assured the quality through accreditation, promoted the development of a quality culture and followed-up on educational developments in Europe.

1996 – The National Commission for the Quality of Higher Education (NCQHE) was established on the initiative of the Rectors' Conference for the further development of the internal and external quality system of universities in Slovenia.

2004 – The Council was renamed as the Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia (CHERS), and was assigned additional duties. The revised HEA also envisaged the establishment of a quality agency but that was delayed. Until 2007, the external evaluations were being performed by NCQHE.

³ Largely based on the information in the SAR, the SQAA website and the SQAA presentations on day 1 of the site visit.

⁴ Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 63/04

2006 – The responsibilities of CHERS were redefined and from 2007 onwards, it was responsible for the external evaluations of study programmes and HEIs.

2010 – SQAA was established taking over CHERS' responsibilities.

SLOVENIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The quality agency SQAA was founded with the Decision on establishment of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education⁵ in accordance with the HEA. SQAA started its operations on 1 March 2010.

The 2016 Act Amending the Higher Education Act (HEA-K)⁶ introduced changes in the accreditation and evaluation system. These include the mandatory compliance with the ESG, a shift to institutional evaluation and the European approach for joint programmes.

SQAA is a body governed by public law and a direct non-governmental budget user in accordance with public finance regulations. The founding rights are exercised by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia on behalf of the Republic of Slovenia.

The agency's mission reads as follows: "The Agency provides for development and operation of the quality assurance system in the Slovenian higher education area. It operates with substantive and formal responsibility and provides counselling for all stakeholders and participants in tertiary education in accordance with the European and global development orientations." Its core values are: independence, responsibility, openness and transparency, professionalism and efficiency, cooperation, commitment to progress.

SQAA'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

The agency has three bodies: the council, the director and an appeal committee. The director is head of two units: the Quality Department and the General Affairs Department.

The council is installed by law (HEA-K, Article 51h) and is the highest decision-making body. It consists of eleven members representing HEIs, higher vocational colleges, students, employers, trade unions and government. All procedural matters are stipulated in the *Rules of Procedure of the Council of the*

⁵ Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, no. 114/09

⁶ Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 75/16

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2010; update 2018). The council meets every month.

The council appoints and dismisses the SQAA director. He is appointed for five years based on a public call for applications (HEA-K, Article 51i). For the larger part of the period under review, the former director was in charge. In March 2018, a new director was appointed. The council also appoints the three members of the appeal committee on the basis of a public invitation (HEA-K, Article 51j).

SQAA employs 18 professionals working in two units. The Quality Department of 13 staff members conducts accreditation and evaluation procedures. The General Affairs Department of 5 employees offers support in human resources, and legal and financial matters. SQAA staff is subject to the regulations governing the status of public employees (HEA-K, Article 51l).

SQAA'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

In the period under review (2016 and 2017), SQAA took 421 decisions on (re-)accreditation of programmes or HEIs, and 25 decisions on the transformation of programmes. It also issued opinions about 15 higher vocational colleges. SQAA was informed about 473 transformations of study programmes. Five procedures did not lead to a positive outcome. Other work of SQAA included seven extraordinary evaluations.

All applications were initiated before HEA-K entered into force by the end of 2016, and therefore followed the previously adapted frameworks. The new criteria and procedures were finalised in the second half of 2017 (Cf. SAR, Annex 7), and are posted on the website.

SQAA performs the accreditation of programmes and HEIs, both existing and new. The accreditation decisions are based on external evaluation reports. Initial accreditation is granted to HEIs for five years; new programmes are accredited for an indefinite period. Accreditation can also be denied. Re-accreditation for a shorter period (maximum three years) is possible in the case of major shortcomings.

External evaluations come in different forms. A regular external evaluation of a HEI is a mandatory part of the re-accreditation procedure. The external evaluation may also be performed as an extraordinary evaluation of a HEI or a programme anytime during the validity of the accreditation. An external evaluation of a programme shall be performed in the re-accreditation procedure of a HEI, an extraordinary evaluation of a programme or an evaluation of a sample of programmes.

- Initial accreditation and re-accreditation of programmes: an expert team writes an assessment report based on desk research of the application. In the case of re-accreditation, the self-evaluation is the basis for the external evaluation. In exceptional cases, a site visit is organised. SQAA criteria cover several areas of assessment: composition and content, concept of implementation; in the case of extraordinary or sample evaluation, also internal quality assurance and improvement, transformation and update, implementation of programme.
- Initial accreditation and re-accreditation of HEIs: an expert team writes an assessment report based on desk research of the application and a site visit. In the case of re-accreditation, the self-evaluation is the basis for the external evaluation. Applications for transformations are processed according to the criteria for re-accreditation. Areas of assessment: operations, human resources and material conditions; in the case of re-accreditation, also students and internal quality assurance and improvement, transformation, update and implementation of programmes.

As mentioned before, SQAA's two main activities are the accreditation and evaluation of programmes and HEIs. Two other principal activities involve higher vocational colleges and international programmes.

- Accreditations of international joint programmes, following an external evaluation within the re-accreditation procedure of a HEI, an extraordinary evaluation of a programme or an evaluation of a sample of study programmes;
- Notifications of international joint programmes and programmes of international associations of universities accredited abroad, if and when the programme is accredited by an EQAR registered agency;
- External evaluation of higher vocational colleges;
- Meeting the requirements for entry of transnational higher education (THE) to a SQAA public register, based on a THE agreement.

The agency is an active member of various quality assurance associations. In addition, it is or has been engaged in a number of international projects and entered into cooperation agreements with a few other quality assurance agencies.

SQAA'S FUNDING

The operation of SQAA is funded by the state (HEA-K, Article 51.m). Until three years ago, it was financed by the European Social Fund ESF (60%) and the national budget (40%). A budget of ca. € 1.3 million is provided on an annual basis.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF SQAA WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

Evidence

External quality assurance activities on institutional and programme level are SQAA's main activities. By law, SQAA should adhere to the ESG and therefore all evaluations are based on this European quality assurance framework. Most procedures include a self-evaluation report, an external review by an independent expert team, a review report and a decision. Outcomes of the evaluations including most of the external reports are published on the SQAA website. The panel will look at the various steps in the procedure when reviewing ESG 2.3.

As a quality assurance agency, SQAA undertakes external quality assurance activities on a regular basis. The annual reports (SAR, Annex 4) give a good overview of SQAA's work, also in numbers, and are available on the website. In the last self-evaluation period (2016 and 2017), SQAA decided on some 450 applications for (re-)accreditation (SAR, pp. 18-22). The agency's council takes decisions for a period of five years after which HEIs and programmes need to apply for re-accreditation.

The council of 11 members is the highest decision-taking body of SQAA and represents all relevant stakeholders. The council does not include an international member. At least one member studies or works abroad, thus adding an international element to the composition of the council. It meets regularly, usually once a month, and the attendance rate is high. SQAA staff prepares sessions of the council. Minutes of the meetings are publicly available up to February 2018; minutes of the last meeting in April are missing. Upon perusal of some minutes, the panel found a list of decisions; information on decision-taking processes, policy or developmental issues were not included. The council considers itself acting on two levels: operational issues count for 75% of the work; other topics including legislation and quality assurance amount to 25%. It observes a clear distinction between its main task (decisions on accreditation and evaluation) and its advisory role. In this last capacity, the council puts contacts with ministries and other stakeholders as item 2 on its agenda.

According to the SAR, criteria for the accreditation and external evaluation of HEIs and programmes have been developed and are regularly updated in consultation with the stakeholders. The most recent version of the criteria follows the aforementioned changes in the legal framework (SAR, Annex 7). As explained by the agency prior to the panel's visit, none of the procedures according to the new criteria has been concluded yet. As a result, all assessment reports and formal decisions in the period under review are based on the previous criteria. These were also published on SQAA's website, as the 2015 Review observed (p. 18).

A quality staff unit performs all external procedures according to predefined methods and criteria. A general affairs department supports this unit. SQAA also plays an advisory role in the use and understanding accreditation and evaluation procedures, and in a variety of other quality assurance matters (SAR, p. 66). Furthermore, both departments participate in the agency's international activities with a distinctive role for the SQAA (former) director (SAR, pp.32-33). Plans are on the way to install a third department for IT and data management, thematic analyses and international actions (cf. ESG 3.4 and ESG 3.5).

Because of the revised laws for higher education in 2016, SQAA redefined its mission, vision and values. SQAA also reconsidered its strategy document highlighting its major objectives for the period 2017-2020 (SAR, Annex 6). Another relevant policy document is the *Quality Manual* (SAR, Annex 3) focusing on the internal quality assurance of the agency. All policy documents are posted on the SQAA website. The panel will return to the manual under ESG 3.6.

The SAR states that stakeholders are involved in the agency's governance and work. External stakeholders are well represented in the SQAA council including students and employers. The student council of independent HEIs⁷ is not represented in the agency's council. To some extent, stakeholders have been able to give their input in amending the educational law and the new accreditation criteria. This was confirmed during the site visit.

The new management intends meeting with stakeholders at a more regular basis. End 2018, beginning 2019, SQAA plans a conference together with the Academy of Sciences and Arts. Contacts with employers can be renewed as soon as the data in eNakvis on the labour market has been completed. The director also wants his staff to be more actively involved in all quality matters.

All expert teams consist of a minimum of three members with at least one international expert and one student. Expert teams operate according to the *Site Visit Protocol* and a *Manual for Experts*. Both documents are available on the agency's website, and will be discussed in more detail under ESG 2.3.

Having been recently appointed, the director's priority is at home. In future, he endeavours to combine his core business in Slovenia with international pursuits with an added value. One of his focus points will be continuing connections and cooperation in (international) research to the benefit of HEIs and the quality of higher education in Slovenia.

The SWOT analysis in the SAR (pp. 60-61) mentions four strengths that are directly related to ESG 3.1: transparent operation of the agency; intensive cooperation and coordination with stakeholders in the preparation of the criteria; advisory role of the agency; active participation in international associations, working groups and projects. At the same time, the reorganisation of the work in accordance with its new strategic objectives is seen as an opportunity for improvement (see also ESG 3.5).

Analysis

From the facts described above, it is clear that, globally, SQAA meets the standard of ESG 3.1: it undertakes external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis; it has clear and explicit goals and objectives, which were partially revised in 2016 and are publicly available; in their daily operations, SQAA's collaborators actively implement the agency's missions and objectives with dedication.

The panel established that the agency's council includes, amongst others, students and representatives of the labour market. The panel also acknowledges the restrictions regarding the

⁷ In the SAR, SQAA refers to private HEIs as independent HEIs.

rectors and vice-rectors in the council; they are not eligible as council members. At the same time, the panel was somewhat taken aback by the rather formal and offstandish attitude of some the council members. The panel would have expected the council to be more open to a constructive dialogue with government and HEIs. The council's unconditional commitment would certainly contribute to the further development of a quality culture in Slovenia. The panel finds that the council as the highest decision-body needs to set the example and strive to involve all stakeholders in SQAA's governance and work. A good start for the council would be meeting with all relevant stakeholders, separate or in mixed composition, on a more regular basis.

The same can be said about the SQAA office. The involvement of stakeholders in legislation is an interesting development but the panel also detected some defects. In some instances, stakeholders were not always taken seriously. Not all input can be taken into account when redesigning an accreditation system but stakeholders are entitled to proper feedback. As feedback mechanisms are part of any agency's internal quality assurance system, the panel will come back to the topic under ESG 3.6.

Despite SQAA's claim that students are involved in all the agency's activities the panel found that this is not always the case. Students of independent HEIs seem to be left out in some bodies, and they do not necessarily participate in peer reviews. The panel finds the discrepancy in involvement of stakeholders of public and private HEIs not in compliance with the ESG. And this goes beyond students considering SQAA's full responsibility for maximum involvement of all stakeholders. Also higher officials of private HEIs expressed themselves in critical terms when talking with the panel.

Finally, the panel shares the director's views on prioritising tasks and responsibilities at home and the international activities, in that order.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends SQAA exploring ways to ensure the full commitment of all stakeholders to the external quality assurance process.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel suggests inviting an international member to join the agency's council. It will increase SQAA's international knowhow and recognition status to the benefit of the agency and its stakeholders.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

Standard: Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

Evidence

As described in the introductory chapters, SQAA is a body governed by public law and a direct non-governmental budget user in accordance with public finance regulations. The founding rights are exercised by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia on behalf of the Republic of Slovenia. SQAA was founded by Slovenian law in 2009 with the Resolution of the Founding of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (in Slovenian). The decision was published in the *Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia* (No. 114/09). A revised HEA-K was adopted and published in 2016 (No. 75/16).

The agency started work on 1 March 2010. The council is the agency's highest decision-making body (HEA-K, Article 51h). Based on this article, the council determines on procedures and criteria for the accreditation and evaluation procedures at programme and institutional level. These documents are legally binding and are posted on the SQAA website.

In meeting with the panel, the Minister of Education confirmed her recognition of SQAA as the competent body for quality assurance in Slovenia. The minister also emphasised the good working relationships between her ministry and the agency. Other topics discussed at the level of the Ministry are related to the assessment of faculties or schools and of branches of Slovenian HEIs abroad. The Minister of Education and SQAA exchanged their different views on the matter and came to an understanding. An official video on higher education in Slovenia, promoting student mobility was shown to the panel. The film explicitly mentions SQAA guarantying the quality of Slovenian higher education. In addition, the agency's council claims that SQAA has been gaining increasing respect and recognition in the past years. In former times, SQAA was considered a kind of inspectorate. The shift towards institutional accreditation and peer review is conducive for a wider acceptance of SQAA as a competent accreditation agency.

According to the SAR, stakeholders recognise the authority of the agency. At the site visit, this was confirmed in various meetings. Even so, HEIs maintain a critical attitude towards the accreditation criteria and some procedures. Appeals against decisions are limited, and show a decreasing number in recent years.

In the SWOT analysis, the international recognition of the agency is considered a strength (SAR, p. 60). As an EQAR registered agency since 2013, SQAA is officially recognized abroad. SQAA is an active member of ENQA, and a few other international quality assurance associations.

Analysis

The panel has established that SQAA has a legal basis as the quality assurance agency in Slovenia. Documents after perusal by the panel underpin this statement. Furthermore, all relevant stakeholders confirmed the authority of the agency in matters of quality assurance. Most importantly, also the Minister of Education in person gave her full support to the agency's tasks and work. The shift to institutional accreditation is also seen as proof of the wide acceptance of the agency's official status.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard: Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

2015 review recommendation

SQAA is advised to take steps toward achieving better formal independence from the government.

Evidence

Organisational independence

According to the SAR, the HEA-K guarantees the independence of the agency. Independence also features as SQAA's first core value. Recent development, however, have given rise to considerable concerns about the independence of the agency. In the summer 2017, the Ministry for Public Administration (MPA) proposed to change the position of the agency and its council, and bring them

under direct governmental control. Until so far, the plan for change has not been successful. The SWOT analysis refers to the potential legislative amendments as a serious threat to the agency's independence and autonomy (SAR, p. 61). At the site visit, the SQAA management told the panel that the situation has changed, and that it does not foresee any threats in the near future. When discussing the matter with the panel, the Minister of Education reassured the panel that this so-called threat was no longer existent; the amendments failed to pass.

The Minister reassured the panel that the Ministry for Education, Science and Sport is supportive of the autonomy of SQAA. The Ministry meets with the agency's director or council once or twice a year, but without any interference in SQAA's work. The Ministry considers SQAA as an investment and not as a cost, according to the Minister.

The strategy document states that a separate Agency Act on evaluations and accreditations could further strengthen its organisational independence (SAR, Annex 6, p. 6). By law, SQAA is a non-governmental budget user and belongs to a group of state institutions for which separate acts apply. At present, SQAA's organizational independence is mainly determined by the sector-specific HEA-K and the decision of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia establishing the National Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. SQAA endeavors to obtain an autonomous act, which should be based on the present HEA-K, the decision on the establishment of the agency, the criteria for evaluation and accreditation including the description of all required procedures, and other regulations applicable for similar state institutions. The agency's newly appointed director told the panel that he is determined to pursue a separate act and has good hopes in obtaining this goal. A first draft has already been written. He also stated that SQAA is the only autonomous agency in Slovenia, where the state does not hold the majority in its management. The state is represented by two member only in SQAA's council.

Operational independence

Article 51e of HEA-K states that "the Agency shall be independent and autonomous in its operation. It shall be bound by the principles of professionalism, impartiality, legality and political neutrality." The *Quality Manual* says that the agency performs its statutory duties with the aim to provide 'independent' assistance in all quality matters (SAR, Annex 3, p. 3).

The Criteria for the Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes is the formal framework (SAR, Annex 7). These criteria are said to have been adopted in agreement with all stakeholders in higher education. Additional rules and regulations are described in various publically available documents such as the *Manual for Experts* (SQAA, February 2013). The manual aims at supporting the autonomy of the agency and independence of experts through high quality, professional, unbiased and consistent work. All documents are listed in annex 4 of this report.

All evaluation and accreditation procedure involve external expert teams. SQAA's strategy document states that an integral and essential part of the agency is its independent experts (SAR, Annex 6, p. 4). Before the start of any SQAA procedure, experts sign a statement confirming they will observe the principles of no conflict of interests and impartiality, and act professionally, autonomously and independently (cf. ESG 2.4). After the start of the assessment procedure, an expert can be replaced by decision of the council as foreseen in the *Criteria for experts* (SAR, Annex 9). The no conflict of interest rule including a separate form is also applicable to council members and SQAA staff members. In addition, HEIs confirmed that the independence of panel and staff members never caused any problems.

Given the recent introduction of the new accreditation system, the agency is still working on updates of most of its documents.

Independence of formal outcomes

By law, SQAA can grant accreditation to HEIs and programmes. External quality assurance evaluations by independent experts reporting on the outcomes are the basis for all accreditation decisions.

Article 3 of the SQAA criteria on the decision-making process reads as follow: “The Agency shall adopt decisions independently” (SAR, Annex 7). The agency’s council is the highest decision body. Council members are expected to “act in a professional, independent and autonomous manner and shall not be bound by the decisions, positions and instructions of the institutions that appointed them or of other institutions” (HEA-K, Article 51h). To avoid any interference from HEIs a number of functionaries (rectors, deans and other officials) cannot be appointed as members of the agency’s council.

According to the council, some issues of concern remain despite the great step towards full autonomy. Most are arising from so-called grey areas in legislation. The council mentioned that the Ministry of Education might have interfered with the agency’s work. According to the management, this was an isolated case mainly due to a misunderstanding. HEIs reported that in some cases the Ministry refused to include formal accreditation decisions into the official register. Since the implementation of HEA-K, the register has been transferred to SQAA. In addition, representatives of private HEIs still object to SQAA because decisions are said to be inconsistent and biased. Even so, management claims that independent HEIs strongly support the operation of the agency.

Talking with the new director, the panel learned that he holds strong views on independence, autonomy, ethics and transparency. He intends strengthening the status of SQAA through a new and separate act. He also enjoys the full support of the council and the staff expecting him to take SQAA to the next stage of quality assurance.

Lastly, the panel learned that the law on education has been changed several times in recent years by higher educational acts. It seems that the educational laws change with every new government.

Analysis

It is clear from the evidence provided that, at present, the independence of the agency is on a high level. During the interviews, the minister, HEIs, students and other stakeholders underlined that progress was made in safeguarding the independence of SQAA in various ways. Even so, the private HEIs mentioned some cases of inconsistency and partiality. In addition, the panel finds that the Agency is financially stable and independent from the Ministry of Education for the budget. The panel will return to this topic when discussing ESG 3.5.

That situation can change, however, as a result from political upheavals. The panel understood that the draft for new legislation with amendments of the present HEA-K recently initiated by the government has been overruled much to the relief of the stakeholders. This was confirmed by both the Minister of Education and the SQAA management. Even so, the long-term sustainability of SQAA’s independence remains a concern.

Additionally, it is evident that in a small country like Slovenia, all the members of the academic community are connected in one way or the other. This could also be a potential threat to SQAA’s independence at organisational and operational level as recognised by the agency.

The panel fully supports the new director’s endeavours to further develop his vision on autonomy and to translate this vision into the agency’s daily work. A separate law securing SQAA’s independency and autonomy might be helpful in this respect.

Lastly, the panel heard about disturbing examples of incidents that show that the independence of the agency is not always fully understood by the Slovenian authorities and this should be avoided.

Nevertheless, the panel finds that SQAA has made considerable progress in securing its independent status since the previous review.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends SQAA paying due attention to maintain the agency's independence and making good use of the available instruments.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel suggests involving more international experts in the agency's work to strengthen a public perception of SQAA's independence.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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

2017 EQAR

Given that SQAA is in the first evaluation and accreditation cycle, the Register Committee acknowledged that the [...] system wide-analyses could not possibly have been fully implemented in practice yet. [This matter] thus require[s] further attention and will need to be addressed in the next external review of SQAA.

Evidence

The SAR states that the agency produces system-wide analyses on accreditation and evaluation procedures every three years. A first analysis was published in 2013, covering the period of 2010-2013. In March 2018, i.e. five years later, the *Report on the Quality in Slovenian Higher Education and Higher Vocational Education in the Period from 2014 – 2017* was published and posted on the agency's website. The report says to be an extensive system-wide analysis of external evaluations and self-evaluation reports of HEIs. It combines an analysis of the evaluation procedures and a report on the quality of Slovenian higher education.

During the interviews, not too many stakeholders seemed to be aware of the existence of this 2018 SQAA report. Not too many were involved in the process or asked for feedback. When asked about their ideas about thematic analyses in general, stakeholders were not able to give any suggestions. HEIs and other stakeholders more specifically referred to the government as being primarily responsible for such studies. The latter was confirmed by the agency; the Ministry of Education provides its own analyses without SQAA's input.

Discussing the matter with the Minister of Education, she expects SQAA fulfilling its tasks and providing thematic analyses that are useful information for stakeholders including the ministry. However, she also realizes that this type of work costs time and money.

None of the policy documents or action plans refer to thematic analyses. A procedure for a thematic analysis as a structured process is not in place. The SAR does not supply information on dissemination activities. When asked, SQAA referred to the *Quality Manual* (SAR, Annex 3, pp. 15-16) being the basic document for meta-reports and meta-analyses with the aim of quality improvement. The main target-audience is supposed to be HEIs and students; as said before, they are not aware of such initiatives.

As mentioned under ESG 3.1, the new director announced plans for a third department dealing with data information and thematic analyses amongst other things. He also acknowledged that in recent years priority had been given to other tasks such as the many procedures and the introduction of a new accreditation system.

The panel learned that the staff is aware of the importance and relevance of thematic analyses, and that it wants to contribute more substantially to this type of work. The staff members expect that they will have more time for analytical work in the new accreditation system. Additionally, the eNakvis system will provide a good database for further analysis. Lastly, the staff pointed out that a further investment in thematic analyses agrees with the strategic aim of expanding the agency's advisory role.

Analysis

The panel appreciates the matter-of-fact approach of the new management and the awareness of the staff regarding the importance of thematic analyses. SQAA has produced just one report in a period of five years, and this report is not fully in line with the expectations of the ESG. The target-audience remains vague. In addition, it is not apparent that the outcomes were discussed with stakeholders.

The panel learned with interest about the plans for the new unit dealing with data informatics and thematic analysis. This unit can start work as soon as the required resources are obtained. One of the first tasks should be to develop a method for the production and dissemination of thematic analyses on issues that are relevant to its stakeholders. In addition, eNakvis is expected to provide a solid basis with relevant data for further analysis as soon as it is fully operational.

SQAA looks favourable upon the panel's suggestion to engage PhD candidates in the production of analyses. It might lessen the burden on the current staff, and other agencies have good experience with this practice. It might be worthwhile to look for good practices abroad.

The panel finds that recent developments are a good and decisive step forward given the comments and concerns expressed in previous reviews. At this stage, however, EQAR's concern has not been fully addressed.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends SQAA developing a method for the production and dissemination of thematic analyses on issues that are relevant to its stakeholders.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard: Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

2015 review recommendation

The panel raises a point of major concern which is the current financial situation of the agency. SQAA's budget is currently covered to the extent of approx. 60% by European Structural Funds which will expire in August 2015. Despite of optimistic views on this issue by the management and support by the ministry for higher education there was no security that the state budget will compensate for the European Funds in case they would not be prolonged. Since 14 out of 24 staff are funded by European money this situation is a significant risk for the overall operations of SQAA. However, these circumstances are part of the national context and thus out of control of SQAA.

2017 EQAR

The Register Committee noted the review panel's concerns with regards to the financial sustainability of the agency after the cease of the funding from the ESF in 2014. The Register Committee underlined that SQAA is expected to submit a Substantive Change Report (see §6.1 of the EQAR Procedures for Applications) once the funding situation has changed, including an analysis on how the sustainability of SQAA's funding will be ensured.

Evidence

Financial resources

Article 51m of the HEA-K states that "the funds for the work of the Agency shall be provided from the national budget". SQAA is established as a direct budget user, which means that the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports is not financially responsible, in order for the agency to have an independent financial status. Since 2016, SQAA is fully financed by the government and SQAA negotiates its budget directly with the Ministry of Finance. By now, all project funds have been replaced by integral funds from the national budget. According to the SAR, the budget allocated to SQAA suffices for the performance of all its activities. Following the HEA-K, however, additional funds are needed to enable the agency to perform at least two new tasks: (1) the introduction of institutional accreditation upon controlled evaluation of study programmes; (2) a more distinct advisory role.

The newly appointed director holds a slightly different view on the available funds. The new tasks do not necessarily generate extra work and therefore extra money. According to the director, extra funds are needed for the implementation of new initiatives related to IT, experts, analytical work, staff development, international activities etc. The director is confident that he will obtain the necessary funds to attract at least two extra staff members. Apparently, the Ministry of Finance already agreed on hiring an IT employee starting mid-2018.

The director is responsible for drafting the financial and work plans to be approved by the council (HEA-K, Article 51i). These plans are posted on the SQAA's website.

The panel had a closer look at the 2017 plan (SAR, Annex 5) and learned of the need of additional funds. Extra funding is required because of the new accreditation system with additional roles for the agency. In previous years, the agency has been unsuccessful in attracting additional staff due to financial constraints. The agency is currently financing all the activities (salaries, accreditations, material costs, external experts, Agency Council, Appeal Committee) with approximately € 1.3 million annually. If the agency received only a third (€ 2 million) from the allocated € 6 million, it would be able to offer quality work and invest in its further development (SAR, Annex 5, p.24). The experience from previous years and the annual governmental limits, show that the budget is insufficient and that additional resources are called for.

The Court of Audit came to the same conclusion: "In its response report, the government assessed that the expected act amending HEA will probably not make a significant change of the costs of the Agency in the future and that the Agency will probably make a financial plan of the costs of procedures in accordance with the changes HEA or it will adapt the assessments to the available resources. Additionally, the government expressed the desire for the Agency to expand its operation, especially in the direction of the implementation of developmental and analytical work and the enhancing of the advisory activity which also brings along financial obligations." (SAR, Annex 5, p. 27)

Human resources

SQAA aims to provide and develop adequate resources to support efficient and successful procedures also in terms of staff (SAR, p. 14). SQAA employs 19 staff members including the director. Two

departments are responsible for all procedures and the supporting activities. As previously mentioned (ESG 3.1 and 3.4), in future, a new department will deal with data information, thematic analyses and international activities.

Slovenian legislation for civil servants is applicable to SQAA staff. This includes an integrity plan and a code of conduct (*Official Gazette*, No. 8/2001). The SQAA management holds annual individual work meetings and organises staff development activities. According to the SAR, there is a significant workload for both the SQAA staff and the members of the council. The staff carries out tasks for all bodies of the agency as stipulated in the *Quality Manual* (SAR, Annex 3, chapter 2.1). This was confirmed by the staff.

The aforementioned manual (p. 5) states that the concern for the satisfaction of employees and their professional and career development is “extremely important for the strengthening of quality culture and effectiveness and efficiency of the Agency”. A staff development policy, however, is not available. The new director announced he would take proper action in this respect. Staff told the panel about their participation in various training activities and international events according to individual needs and interests. Some training is mandatory for all staff (e.g. administrative procedures, health and work, and anticorruption). The staff shared with the panel that they would prefer more involvement in the policymaking processes.

According to the director, the shift from programme assessment to institutional reviews might well reduce the workload and (bureaucratic) burden on both sides, HEIs and SQAA. That at least, is one of the goals of the new accreditation system. Furthermore, the advisory role of the agency is to be translated in terms of the external assessment of 2% of the programmes. As such, it is not extra work but rather a welcomed alternative for the present practice of assessing all programmes. This development leaves room for more analytical and international work. The staff welcomes the future changes in their work (see also ESG 3.1 and ESG 3.4).

The agency is renting office space in the centre of Ljubljana, with room for 30 working places. At the time, SQAA anticipated increasing staff numbers.

The SWOT analysis mentions the good relationships amongst staff members and the good management of public resources as two strengths. In the SAR under ESG 3.6 (p. 41), good practices put forward by the SQAA staff include very stable and regular work, active participation in the creation of new criteria, and competences of the staff. The panel noted that only one staff member holds a PhD degree. HEIs find the staff cooperative but they feel more academics, more professionals are needed in order to have a real partnership with added value.

The SWOT considers the delay in the implementation of eNakvis as the new electronic information system as a weakness. Being dependent on a third party (MPA) for making eNakvis fully operational, SQAA finds the continuous deferral not conducive for an effective and efficient manner of running procedures. At the site visit, the panel learned that the new management has prioritized the implementation of eNakvis and that parts of the system have been operational since 1 June 2018. The panel will further discuss this topic in Part 2 of the ESG.

Analysis

SQAA provided convincing evidence for the panel to conclude that the agency is now fully funded by the national budget. The budget provided suffices for the work SQAA is expected to perform according to the HEA-K. Following-up on the EQAR concern, the panel finds that the financial situation of SQAA at present is solid. Even so, permanent vigilance is required given the changing political scene in Slovenia.

New initiatives announced by the director require extra funding: extra staff members and other human resource developments, completing eNakvis, more international experts, and other plans. These new developments might take longer to implement due to financial constraints despite the director's optimism about securing the additional funds (see ESG 3.3).

A positive development is the recent implementation of eNakvis after many delays. However, there is still a lot of time and effort needed to make it completely operational. The panel, therefore, fully supports the director's intention to attract additional IT staff provided the necessary funds can be procured.

The panel considers the reorganisation of the SQAA office with an extra unit an interesting change. It would have preferred, though, that the present staff were involved in developing the plans and the decision-making. As it seems, only few staff members were aware of the plans; they only had it from rumours. Even so, they welcome the plan and see it as a next stage in the development of the agency. The panel finds that this unhappy proceeding not only questions the staff's involvement in human resource matters; it also questions the readiness of the management to engage the present staff in new initiatives. A staff development plan is not available but is said to be underway. The panel expects this plan to anticipate the reorganisation and to take into account the needs and wishes of the present staff. In the period under review, the SQAA staff dealt with large number of procedures. Now time has come to broaden their scope and include other work such as thematic analyses, advisory activities and international events. The agency should provide equal opportunities to all staff members.

The panel concludes that considerable progress has been made but that some concerns remain, also given the comments in previous reviews.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends SQAA ensuring the necessary funding for the implementation of its strategy plan and subsequent action plans including a staff development plan.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

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.

2017 EQAR

The Register Committee noted the panel's analysis that SQAA lacks a coherent and formalised internal quality assurance framework, and the corresponding recommendation of the panel that SQAA systematise its internal quality assurance processes.

Evidence

SQAA works with strategic objectives, annual financial and work plans, and annual self-evaluation reports. The documents are available on the agency's website.

All the aforementioned plans and reports are said to follow the *Quality Manual* (SAR, Annex 3). The quality policy is part of the manual and is not available as a separate document. It remains unclear to what extent the quality manual document is discussed with and agreed upon with all relevant stakeholders.

The 2015 ESG and the 2016 HEA-K are the bases for all SQAA activities. The criteria for accreditation and evaluation procedures have been recently updated following these new developments. This is also the case with the criteria for experts. The *Quality Manual* and most supporting documents such as the *Site Visit Protocol* and the *Manual for Experts* will be revised within the next couple of months.

The original SAR for the external review of the agency was written as a self-evaluation according to the guidelines in the SQAA manual. At the request of ENQA, this self-evaluation was adapted to the ENQA guidelines for external reviews. It should be noted that the 2015 review panel encountered exactly the same problem. When going through the final SAR, the panel found that some topics were still not adequately covered. Examples are the thematic analyses (ESG 3.4), mapping of SQAA's standards against the ESG Part 1 standards 1.1 – 1.10. (ESG 2.1) and the complaints procedure (ESG 2.7). The SAR also pays little attention to joint programmes and transnational higher education, although these activities were clearly a part of the Terms of Reference.

In preparation of the periodic self-evaluation, the agency's staff was given the opportunity to list good practices and opportunities for further improvement. A satisfaction survey is planned for end 2018. Other stakeholders also participated in surveys. International experts, however, did not. They told the panel there was many opportunities for informal feedback. None of the stakeholders with whom the panel met could recall having received any feedback after filling out surveys (see also ESG 3.1).

None of the stakeholders has been asked to reflect on the final SAR for the ENQA procedure. None of the stakeholders present during the interview sessions with the panel, except for the SQAA staff, was familiar with the document, not even the agency's council.

Asked about stakeholders' involvement in the agency's work, the president of the Slovenian Student Union (SSU), for instance, told the panel that he has regular meetings with the SQAA director. This is not the case, however, for the representatives of the student council of independent universities. Quality assurance managers of HEIs sometimes discuss matters with SQAA but they feel their voice is not heard. They are especially critical about being treated differently according to HEI's size and profile. They also want SQAA to expand its advisory role and to look for additional resources. Extra funds would allow SQAA to recruit more professionals and international peers (cf. ESG 3.5).

A statement of non-conflict of interest is available for all experts and council members (see ESG 2.4). As stated under ESG 3.5, SQAA staff are considered civil servants and observe the government's integrity plan and code of conduct.

Analysis

Since the previous review, SQAA has further formalised its internal quality assurance processes. A set of documents are available allowing a more structured and regular approach to quality assurance. The panel noted, however, that most of these documents including the *Quality Manual* need updating.

The *Quality Manual* implies that a proper internal quality assurance system is in place, but the panel found some discrepancies especially related to the further development of a quality culture, the final SAR, stakeholders' involvement and the feedback mechanisms (see also ESG 3.1).

The panel found that the agency's quality policy is not visibly shared by all stakeholders. Publishing and discussing the policy might help engaging stakeholders more directly in SQAA's work and efforts to improve the quality of its work. It might even result in revising the quality policy taking into account the different views and opinions of both internal and external stakeholders. The panel certainly encourages the agency discussing the notion of quality culture more frequently and openly.

During the panel's site visit, it became obvious that the SAR was not the product of teamwork and collective thinking within the agency. The panel also established that the council was not involved in

the production of the SAR. According to the manual, however, the council is responsible for the agency's internal quality assurance. Most importantly, the SAR was not discussed with external stakeholders (QA managers, experts, students, chamber of commerce etc.) despite SQAA's claim of their involvement. The panel concludes that the input of both internal and external stakeholders in producing the final SAR has been insufficient.

At the same time, the panel recognises that stakeholders have been involved to some degree in writing the original self-evaluation according to the guidelines in the SQAA manual. The panel certainly supports this effort as a tool for the further improvement of the agency's work. Even so, it remains incomprehensible that SQAA decided twice (in 2018 and 2015) to produce reports that do not comply with ENQA's requirements. It certainly raises questions about lessons learned and this was again apparent in SQAA's response to the draft of this report on this topic.

The panel disapproves of stakeholders holding different positions within the agency's quality assurance system. The panel points out that the input of all stakeholders are equally relevant. Especially the position of students of independent HEIs, small-size HEIs and international peers need strengthening.

The panel also finds that SQAA conducts regular surveys but not all stakeholders are included. Furthermore, the present feedback mechanisms are inadequate.

The panel concludes, also in reference to EQAR's concern, that SQAA has further systematised its internal quality assurance system but there is still room for improvement. The agency should put more effort in encouraging positive engagement of all stakeholders. The panel expects the agency's council to lead the way, given its explicit role in the development of SQAA's quality system according to the *Quality Manual* (SAR, Annex 3, p. 3).

Panel recommendations

- The panel recommends SQAA including 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;
- The panel recommends SQAA involving all its bodies in the conception and the implementation of its internal quality assurance policy. The panel feels that the agency's council as the highest decision-making body could lead the way and play a more active role.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Standard: Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

Evidence

SQAA has been registered on EQAR since 31 July 2013 following the positive outcomes of an external review. Having undergone another external review in 2014, SQAA became member of ENQA on 6 March 2015. In 2017, a follow-up report was submitted. Soon afterwards, SQAA applied for a third external review to be coordinated by ENQA. Following this review, the agency seeks renewal of both the EQAR registration (valid until July 2018) and the ENQA membership (valid until March 2020). Extension of its membership is also one of SQAA's objectives for the period 2017-2020 as mentioned in the agency's strategy document (SAR, Annex 6).

The previous reviews identified the following major areas of improvement: thematic analysis (ESG 3.4); resources (ESG 3.5); SQAA's internal quality assurance (ESG 3.6); consideration of HEIs' internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1); implementing processes: criteria and follow-up procedures (ESG 2.3); reporting (ESG 2.6). These issues are discussed under the respective standards in the report.

In addition to the periodic external reviews based on international regulations (ENQA and EQAR) SQAA also undergoes an annual self-evaluation in accordance with the agency's *Quality Manual* (SAR, Annex 3). In the period under review, SQAA produced two such reports (SAR, Annex 10 and 11).

Analysis

With the participation of SQAA in three subsequent external reviews – in 2013, 2014 and 2018 – the agency complies with the standard on the Cyclical External Review of Agencies.

This 2018 review will also cover progress from the previous review and report on the aforementioned issues under the relevant standards. It is clear from the evidence provided that SQAA has adequately responded to most of the recommendations. Some recurring issues, however, need continued attention.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

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.

2015 review recommendation

SQAA might wish to provide institutions with more guidance for the preparation of the annual self-evaluation reports in order to cater for a more efficient integration into the agency's activities.

2017 EQAR

The Register Committee [...] underlined that greater attention to internal quality assurance systems would be important in paving the way for the planned transition from programme to institutional accreditation in 2017.

Evidence

In the SAR, the agency presents a mapping of the standards used by SQAA against the ESG Part 1 standards 1.1 – 1.10 (SAR, Annex 1 and 2). Upon request of the panel, SQAA provided the panel with a revised version including the agency's third activity (international procedures) and the external evaluation of higher vocational colleges.

Part 1. IQA Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in EHEA (ESG)	SQAA standards Initial accreditation (private) HEIs (standards & articles of the criteria)	SQAA standards Re-accreditation (all) HEIs (standards & articles of the criteria)	SQAA standards (Initial) accreditation programmes including joint programmes (standards & articles of the criteria)	SQAA standards Re-accreditation & evaluation programmes including joint programmes (standards & articles of the criteria)	SQAA standards External evaluation higher vocational colleges (standards & articles of the criteria)
ESG 1.1 Quality assurance policy	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 1, 6; ART 16 of the criteria		ART 21, subchapter II.2.2	ST 1, 6, 19
ESG 1.2. Development and approval of study programmes	Programme plans, as there is no institution yet.	ST 2, 7 ART 16, subchapter II.2.2	ST 1, 2	ST 1	ST 18, 20, 21

ESG 1.3. Student-oriented learning, education and evaluation	Programme plans, as there is no institution yet.	ST 2, 11, 12	ST 4, 5	ST 4, 5	ST 21, 15 ART 16
ESG 1.4 Student admission, study process, recognition and issue of diplomas	Programme plans, as there is no institution yet.	ST 6 ART 14, chapter B.3 ART 16, subsection II.2.2 ART 23	ST 5	ST 5	ST 2, 4, 5, 9, 12 ART 16
ESG 1.5 Lecturers	ST 6, 7	ST 3, 8	ST 4	ST 4, 5	ST 3, 8, 21, 22
ESG 1.6 Study resources and support for students	ST 4, 8, 9, 10, 11	ST 4, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17	ST 3, 4	ST 4	ST 4, 9, 10, 21 ART 9
ESG 1.7 Information management	ST 5	ST 5, 6	ST 1	ST 1	ST 5, 6, 15, 17, 18
ESG 1.8 Public information	Indirectly through the operation of the HEI and/or the documents submitted (for the first accreditation)	ST 5, 7	The programme does not exist yet	ART 23, standard 5, point c Subchapter II.2.2	ST 5, 7
ESG 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic evaluation of study programmes	ART 21 and 22, subchapter II.2.2; from the application form it is clear that the institute should do this periodically.	ST 6, 13 ART 16	The programme does not exist yet; but the system is evident when assessing the institution.	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 6, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21
ESG 1.10 Periodic external quality assurance	Chapter III of the Criteria "Procedures" including the period for granting accreditation in III.4.				ART 4, 12

Published accreditation criteria and standards are covering all major quality assurance areas of higher education at institutional and programme level, also for international procedures and higher vocational colleges.

In the introduction to the revised mapping, the agency explains that compliance with ESG 1.10 can be seen in the third chapter of the criteria covering the procedures and including the period for granting accreditation (SAR, Annex 7, III.4). Article 14 of the HEA also holds the mandatory periodic external quality assessment. SQAA also points out that the HEA is 'superior' to the criteria and must be (in full) taken into account by all stakeholders; this explains why these provisions were not copied into the criteria.

Another clarification regards the assessment of individual ESG through other SQAA standards in the criteria, which are not explicitly stated as such. As an example: strategy, mission, and objectives of HEI are also assessed in the initial accreditation procedure of a programme.

At the site visit, stakeholders expressed their concern about the implementation of new quality topics such as student-centred learning and the development of a quality culture. HEIs told the panel they want to align both systems – internal quality assurance (ESG Part 1) and external quality assurance (ESG Part 2) – and move away from quality control, bureaucratic procedures and ticking boxes.

Analysis

The panel has established that the final mapping of the SQAA standards against the ESG standards in Part 1 has been done in an appropriate way. The overview combines standards and articles in the criteria for accreditation and external evaluations with the legal requirements according to the HEA. This is the case for all procedures, be it initial, (re-) accreditation, institutional, or programme assessment, private or public HEIs, international joint programmes or higher vocational colleges. For all SQAA procedures, similar standards in the criteria document are used.

The 2015 recommendation of the previous panel seems no longer relevant. In the new system, the production of annual self-evaluation reports is not a requirement. HEIs will decide for themselves on the form of any self-reflection as is befitting a mature system of internal quality assurance. During the site visit, both HEIs and SQAA confirmed this line of thought.

In general, the panel finds that the agency's accreditation system can benefit from a more open and less prescriptive approach. According to the ESG, quality assurance should support the development of a quality culture (ESG 2015, p. 8). SQAA can foster this by focussing more on quality enhancement and less on quality control. In doing so, it could lead the way for HEIs to a more effective internal quality assurance system, also given EQAR's concern. A recommendation to this effect is included in the next chapter on ESG 2.2.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

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.

Evidence

External quality assurance in Slovenian higher education is defined in the 2016 HEA-K and the 2015 ESG. All stakeholders have been enabled to participate in the process of reviewing and improving the standards for accreditation and evaluation. When discussing the methodologies and underlying criteria with the stakeholders, the panel learned that not all share the same understanding of the level of involvement. HEIs, for example, received a draft with criteria for comments but they felt that many were not taken into account. International peers have not been able to participate in the discussions about the new criteria.

In general, though, HEIs welcome the shift to institutional accreditation although they realise that they take on an increased responsibility. The new system allows discussions about the whole picture instead of fragments of that same picture. It will also be more cost-effective offering an opportunity to further invest in programme development with an increased focus on content rather than administrative issues and formal procedures. During the interviews, however, HEIs expressed their worries about time-consuming and bureaucratic procedures under the new system.

One particular point of debate relates to the degree of diversity and flexibility the new accreditation allows. Slovenian higher education is very diverse: big and small HEIs; large faculties or schools; public and private HEIs; HEIs and higher vocational colleges. Not all stakeholders are convinced of the fitness for purpose of the methodology regardless the size and profile of HEIs. The agency, however, is confident about the new accreditation system being able to handle all different types of HEIs. The new management is also open to new ideas and agreed to enter into an experiment with the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) when reviewing the University of Ljubljana. Both agencies – SQAA and AQ Austria – will evaluate the university with observers from both sides.

A problem still unsolved is the official recognition of accreditations by other accreditation bodies, such as EQUIS and AACSB in the case of Economics. At programme level, SQAA experts take into account such accreditations but a formal SQAA procedure is lacking.

With the introduction of the new accreditation system, stakeholders expect an increasing interest in quality enhancement rather than quality control. During the site visit, the panel learned that the

notion of peer review, however, is rather new. Even so, the agency's council sees that quality awareness is growing.

Analysis

The former accreditation system seemed largely based on quality control; the new system is more geared towards quality enhancement or so it claims. The agency sees this as a major step forwards, but not all stakeholders share this positive appraisal. The panel understands that not all stakeholders are yet fully familiar with notions such as peer review, quality enhancement and quality culture. Taking up on its advisory role, the agency would do well investing more in the public debate on these issues.

The 2016 criteria for accreditation and evaluation are said to have been adopted in consultation with the stakeholders, and yet the panel established that the same stakeholders hold different opinions on their fitness for purpose. The panel agrees with HEIs arguing that the (new) accreditation system needs more flexibility; it cannot be one size fits all. In addition, more detailed clarification of the criteria is called for (see also ESG 2.3 and ESG 2.5), and bureaucracy should be avoided at all costs. It might be worth trying to reopen the discussion about the criteria and to revise them, if need be, in order to guarantee fitness for purpose.

A positive development is certainly the experiment with the Austrian agency when reviewing the University of Ljubljana. The panel commends the agency for this innovative and international approach towards quality assurance. The panel also appreciates international accreditations obtained at programme level. The panel encourages SQAA to ensure these accreditations are formally recognised. Furthermore, the panel is positive about the involvement of international peers in the external assessments but the facilities offered could be improved. Recurrent language issues call for structural solutions. The chapter on ESG 2.3 includes a recommendation on the language usage.

The panel concludes that the agency's quality assurance system is adequate but could benefit from more flexibility and fitness for purpose.

Panel commendations

- The panel commends SQAA for the future cooperation with the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) when reviewing the University of Ljubljana by way of experiment;
- The panel commends SQAA for the shift from programme to institutional accreditation.

Panel recommendations

- The panel recommends SQAA applying the adopted methodology with a maximum of flexibility ensuring its fitness for purpose for all Slovenian institutions regardless size and profile. If need be, the methodology should be revised in order to make it more effective;
- The panel recommends SQAA focusing on quality enhancement rather than quality control, and fostering the further development of a quality culture within Slovenian higher education.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

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

2015 review recommendation

SQAA should establish a formalized follow-up procedure as regular part of the reviews. This is particularly important if the move to institutional reviews only materializes.

2017 EQAR

Given that SQAA is in the first evaluation and accreditation cycle, the Register Committee acknowledged that the follow-up procedures [...] could not possibly have been fully implemented in practice yet. [This matter] thus require[s] further attention and will need to be addressed in the next external review of SQAA.

Evidence

As mentioned under ESG 3.1, the SQAA's procedures and criteria for accreditation and evaluation are documented and published on the agency's website. Opinions differ on stakeholders' involvement in the development of the criteria. HEIs, for example, find the present criteria at times rather prescriptive; others are open for multiple interpretation. The SQAA staff, the panel was told, is very helpful in explaining the new criteria to experts and HEIs.

Steps in the external evaluation process follow national (HEA-K) and international (ESG) requirements: a self-evaluation report, an external evaluation usually including a site visit by independent experts, and an evaluation report.

Any external assessment procedure starts with HEIs submitting an application including a self-evaluation report. These reports are publicly available, also to the council that takes the accreditation decision based on the panel report. When asked about the confidentiality of the self-evaluation report, SQAA management was in no doubt about the need to publish these reports for reasons of transparency.

A site visit is compulsory in initial and re-accreditation procedures of a HEI and in an external evaluation of a higher vocational college. In an initial accreditation procedure at programme level, the expert group decides on the necessity of the site visit. Previously, the HEI offering the new programme has already been visited by a panel as part of the institutional (re-)accreditation.

SQAA is keeping the register of external experts for accreditation and evaluation activities. The selection procedure of experts based on a public call is well documented. At the site visit, the panel received additional information about other ways of engaging experts. For further analysis, the panel refers to the next chapter ESG 2.4 on peer-review experts. And as established under ESG 3.3, the agency has developed a procedure for the elimination of potential conflicts of interests.

When discussing ESG 3.1 and ESG 3.6, the panel referred to a *Site Visit Protocol* and a *Manual for Experts* supporting the experts in their work. The protocol specifies responsibilities and tasks of relevant stakeholders, and provides information on how to prepare for and conduct a site visit. The site visit protocol is to be used together with the manual offering guidance through accreditation and

evaluation. Both the protocol and the manual are available on the agency's website, but are still based on the previous accreditation system. An update is scheduled for the summer 2018.

The outcome of any external assessment is a report written by the expert group and assisted by SQAA staff. Most, but not all, reports are published on the agency's website. The panel's findings of the external experts and reporting are to be found under ESG 2.4 and ESG 2.6.

The SAR claims that follow-up procedures have been formalized and incorporated in the agency's regular work. A re-evaluation is applicable when a programme or HEI is granted accreditation for a shorter period due to shortcomings. In those instances, the re-evaluation can be considered as a sort of follow-up procedure. The same applies for the evaluation of sample study programmes as of 2019 intended for continuous monitoring of improvements. The term follow-up as meant in the 2015 ESG, however, does not occur in the Slovenian assessment framework.

The panel also looked in more detail at the various documents available on the agency's website, both in Slovenian and English. Most documents are publicly available but not all are translated into English and some are outdated.

Analysis

In more than one session, stakeholders reiterated that they have full confidence in the professional and well-managed quality assurance processes. Both the agency and the external experts gave ample evidence of sharing the same values such as openness and transparency, responsibility, professionalism and efficiency. As a result, HEIs are willing to accept the outcomes of these assessment procedures.

An assessment report is the result of the external assessment by a group of experts. For a more detailed analysis of the external experts and reporting, the panel refers to ESG 2.4 and ESG 2.6. The panel's recommendations about the expert pool and the publication of reports are listed under the same ESG.

The final stage in the external quality assurance is a consistent follow-up process for considering the action taking by HEIs. Quality agencies are expected to have the mechanisms in place to consider these actions and not only for external assessments with a negative outcome. Of course, there can be various approaches to follow-up, and the agency should determine the nature of it. The next peer review, however, should not be considered as a follow-up. Follow-up should happen in between the reviews to touch base with HEIs to see the results of and plans for improvements or planned after the review. Also a good practice would be that the agency provides some recommendations or methodologies for HEIs to support their follow-up.

Evidence presented to the panel, however, does not refer to any follow-up procedure in line with the ESG despite the 2015 recommendation. The panel, therefore, advises SQAA encouraging HEIs to include a follow-up procedure in their system of internal quality assurance. If need be, SQAA can support HEIs in organising follow-up activities and make them visible to stakeholders, especially students and employers. A consistent follow-up is essential for a successful shift to institutional accreditation with HEIs taking full responsibility also after the external experts have left.

Lastly, the panel is rather critical about the general quality of the documents presented to stakeholders. Not all information is up-to-date and not all reports are published. In addition, some basic documents are missing in an English version and the English translations provided are not faultless. Because of these shortcomings, the supporting documents might be less reliable and useful than intended. This is not helpful for SQAA's international peers as discussed during the meeting with the panel and also in the next chapter ESG 2.4.

The panel concludes that SQAA made progress in implementing its quality assurance processes according to the ESG but that there is still room for improvement, also in relation to EQAR's concerns.

Panel recommendations

- The panel recommends SQAA determining the nature of the follow-up in its quality assurance processes, and not only in external assessments with a negative outcome;
- The panel recommends SQAA encouraging institutions to include consistent follow-up procedures in their internal quality assurance system.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel suggests providing all relevant documents also in English, screening the English translations of its documents, providing them with a date of publication and making them publicly available.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

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).

Evidence

Article 51u of the HEA-K and Article 32 of SQAA's criteria stipulate that every group of independent experts consists of at least three members, at least one of which is a foreign experts and one a student (SAR, Annex 7). As mentioned earlier (ESG 3.3 and 3.6), all experts sign a statement of non-conflict of interest. The agency's *Quality Manual* (SAR, Annex 3) gives further specifications. The manual also states "the agency quality culture is co-created and co-developed by experts, too" (p. 6).

SQAA works with a register of experts for all its procedures. National experts enter the register upon selection after a public call. Criteria for experts are applicable and are publicly available (SAR, Annex 9). During the visit, the panel learned about other ways of entering the register. That is also the case with student members and international peers. The latter are invited on an individual basis according to Article 15 of the above-mentioned criteria (Article 15).

SQAA staff and a working group of the council jointly prepare the composition of panels. HEIs are asked for their approval although this is not a formal step in the procedure. Any complaints or disagreements about panels are treated in the council's meetings with the likely result of changing the composition. In recent years, the number of conflicts over panels has decreased considerably.

Not all HEIs recognise the external experts as their peers. Some interviewees felt that some experts are not competent in the required fields; others are emeriti and not always au courant of the latest developments in education and research. Funds are limited for attracting more experts from abroad. In addition, the language can hamper involvement of foreign experts. At the site visit, the panel learned that assessment procedures are conducted in a flexible way to deal with any language issues. At the same time, the international experts told the panel that it is not always clear what can be expected. They were somewhat critical about their overall involvement in the external assessment. Especially the language barrier results in international peers not fully contributing to the assessment procedures. Overall, they would prefer a more consistent method with clear guidelines about the usage of English.

Article 23 of the criteria for experts states: "A student expert must be, as a general rule, enrolled in the study programme of at least the same cycle as the study programme the he or she assesses." During the site visit, the panel met with student members who are not students as meant in Article 23 nor in the ESG. They seemed to be employed by HEIs as lecturer or PhD candidates. In addition, students of the independent HEIs were not represented in the pool of students as the Student Council of the Independent HEIs told the panel. Overall, there is a shortage of student members for all SQAA procedures.

Given the new system, both the agency's council and management see the need for further investments in the pool of experts and the expert training. A shift in focus is needed away from what some called the 'old school' approach of quality control towards quality enhancement by genuine peers. The director showed a readiness to review and renew the present pool of experts. He will also look into the deficit of experts in some fields and students-experts as reported in the SWOT analysis in the SAR (p. 60). The insufficient in-depth work of some experts is another weakness mentioned in the SAR.

In the period under review, SQAA organised six training sessions for Slovenian experts. The panel perused the training material for national experts. Experts undergo an intensive training programme including observing and reporting in a trial procedure. Only after successfully going through this process the candidates can register as an expert. Experts confirm that the message given to the panel is clearly enhancement oriented. In the training also teamwork is given due consideration. At times, international experts are involved in the training sessions for Slovenian experts. International experts themselves are sent all relevant documents by mail and are briefed by skype or upon arrival prior to the assessment procedure. There is no evidence of a structured approach of this briefing.

SQAA does not offer a separate training programme for student experts. In the former system, the SSU took care of that. The director disclosed that SSU and SQAA have renewed their plans for co-operation in this area.

During the external assessment procedures, experts are assisted by SQAA staff. Experts find their guidance and assistance helpful, explaining procedures and criteria without interfering.

Analysis

The panel established that all SQAA procedures involve peer-review experts including at least one student and one international expert. As often the case in smaller countries, Slovenia encounters problems attracting sufficiently diverse, independent and competent experts for all procedures. Institutional reviews also require different competencies in the group of external experts. The panel, therefore, encourages SQAA to evaluate the expert pool and bring it more in compliance with the current needs following the new system. In addition, the implementation of the procedures for entering the register needs further attention.

The agency is successful in engaging international experts in its panels. It can explore further means to attract more peers from abroad. This is also the explicit and a most reasonable wish of HEIs. Engaging in a peer review, HEIs are entitled to genuine peers with whom they can level. The panel recognises that extra funds are needed to attract more (international) peers whom HEIs recognise as their peers. Another possibility to explore for HEIs is to co-finance the peer-review experts.

The agency should also clarify the English usage in its procedures and make these more consistent. Which documents need to be submitted in English? The SAR or also the annexes? If interviews are conducted in English, will an interpreter be available at all times? And when writing the report, the non-Slovenian experts should be given full support in understanding the Slovenian text. The easiest

way out would seem a procedure in English but the panel understood from the council that not all HEIs support this idea. After all, Slovenian is the legal language, also in higher education.

The panel is of the opinion that student members should be proper bachelor or master students, not employees or PhD candidates. Both SSU and SQAA should take this to heart and see to it with immediate effect. Also all students, including those of independent HEIs, should be included in the expert pool.

Slovenian experts are well prepared for their task. The training material is informative and adequate. The panel is impressed by the thoroughness of the training although it wonders about the efficiency given the vast investment from both sides, SQAA and the individual expert. As the new accreditation system calls for adjustments in the training, this might be the right moment for an evaluation of the present training programme and the start of a more cost-effective approach. In addition, the briefing of the international peers needs further attention. Lastly, the panel follows the director's plan to provide student members with a proper, if need be, separate training in co-operation with SSU. The panel also supports the idea of special training activities for chairs.

Panel commendations

The panel commends SQAA for its extensive training of experts and the involvement of international experts in the training sessions.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends SQAA 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.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel suggests including the approval of HEI's with the proposed panel composition as a formal step in the external assessment process. This could foster the notion of a peer review.

Panel conclusion: substantially 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.

2015 review recommendation

SQAA should strengthen its efforts to develop a shared understanding of criteria by developing and publishing official interpretation of certain criteria and regulations.

Evidence

All external assessments are based on criteria publicly available on the agency's website. They all lead to formal decisions. Stakeholders are acquainted with the criteria and procedures.

The agency's council claims consistency as it operates in circles: the self-evaluation report, the external assessment report and the criteria. Furthermore, one member of the council is a lawyer, and

the agency's lawyer is present at council meetings. Consistency in the outcomes of external assessments is also a recurrent topic in SQAA staff meetings.

No decision-taking regulations are in place. The council takes a decision based on the external assessment report written by a group of independent experts. The council also receives the self-evaluation report produced by HEIs. The agency's staff has no role to play in this process other than providing the relevant documents and offering legal assistance, if necessary. In response to the draft of this report, SQAA management points out that staff members participate in discussions on procedures they conduct. This contradicts the previous statement by SQAA staff made at the site visit.

At various occasions, the panel heard that criteria for assessment are not always clear and leave room for interpretation. Both HEIs and experts find that some regulations can be more specific in order to make procedures more consistent and transparent (cf. ESG 2.3). When asked, the council saw no need for further clarification.

The panel perused more than ten reports by experts resulting from external assessments at both programme and institutional level. The next chapter on ESG 2.6 goes into more detail on reporting.

Once more, the panel remarks that the council's minutes do not say anything about the decision-taking process; they merely list the accreditation decisions (ESG 3.1). For reasons of consistency and transparency, the panel would have expected the council to report more elaborately on the decision taking.

Analysis

The panel established that all external assessments are based on explicit criteria that are published. The panel also noted that SQAA takes great effort in informing stakeholders about its procedures and criteria. Nevertheless, the panel found it questionable that not all criteria are clear to all HEIs. Moreover, the impact of the outcomes resulting from the external assessment and based on these criteria can vary and are not always equally relevant.

The panel finds that the interpretation of the new criteria and regulations needs to be clarified. Although the 2015 recommendation refers to the previous (old) accreditation system, the same recommendation holds for the present (new) system. Further clarification of the criteria and regulations will induce a better and shared understanding of the basics of any quality assurance process. During the site visit, too often stakeholders held different views on requirements and expectations. These uncertainties should be avoided in order to guarantee pre-defined and consistent processes.

The panel shares the concern expressed by HEIs and experts about the consistency of the outcomes because of three reasons: (1) the agency's council does not make use of explicit and transparent decision-taking rules, (2) the council takes decisions without making good use of the SQAA staff's professional input, and (3) the decision-taking process is not properly documented. Discussing this with the council and the director, however, neither party saw the necessity to reconsider this practice.

Panel recommendations

- The panel recommends SQAA developing a shared understanding of criteria and publishing the official interpretation of the criteria and regulations;
- The panel recommends SQAA formalising 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).

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

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.

2017 EQAR

The Register Committee received clarification from SQAA on its Council's decision to publish the expert groups' assessment reports once the decision on accreditation is final. Since publishing of reports has yet to become practice, the Register Committee underlined that this will need to be addressed in the next external review of SQAA.

Evidence

As mentioned under the previous heading (ESG 2.5), the panel reviewed a selection of more than ten experts' reports resulting from programme and institutional evaluations in Slovenian. All reports follow the same format.

External experts report on their findings and give their analysis in writing either in Slovenian or in English. SQAA staff members offer guidance and assistance, and re-edit or translate parts of the report, if needed. HEIs can object to and comment on all the findings of a group of experts that are not correct in their opinion. The final reports are presented to a wider public. Students find this very useful.

Most, but not all, accreditation decisions are listed on the agency's website but without the outcomes of appeal procedures, if any. The panel also noted that not all underlying external assessment reports are published. And if they are, they are not easily accessible. In the case of negative outcomes of an initial accreditation procedure, these reports are not published.

There also seems to be a difference in the number of published reports on the Slovenian and English versions of the agency's website. For example, the Slovenian version of the website lists six reports on study programmes of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Ljubljana; the English version just lists two. The Faculty of Economics, however, offers more than 30 study programmes.

SQAA management acknowledges the shortcomings of the website and hence the publication of reports, and refers to recurring IT problems which should be solved in the very near future.

Analysis

Upon perusal of a sample of reports, the panel is positive about the quality of the experts' reports as the outcome of any external assessment conducted by SQAA. The panel is confident that stakeholders find the reports valuable and the presentation to a wider public helpful. The panel took note that especially students appreciate the dissemination of the reports.

A major issue, however, concerns the publication of the reports. The panel finds that the website of SQAA is not updated regularly. As a result, a significant number of reports on accreditation is not published. Additionally, since the agency takes formal decisions based on the reports, the decisions are not regularly published together with the reports. The panel is willing to take into account the agency's IT problems – missing IT staff and poor maintenance of the website – but holds the agency responsible for fulfilling its responsibilities. Providing adequate information about the outcomes of external assessments is of the utmost importance for all stakeholders and should be given priority in the agency's work.

Another concern of the panel is that SQAA does not publish the negative outcomes of peer reviews in the case of initial accreditation procedures. The panel points out that the publication of *all* outcomes

is needed for reasons of full transparency of the agency's activities. In addition, it is the panel's firm belief that publication of these reports will contribute to further development, not only of the HEI concerned but also other HEIs.

Referring to EQAR's concern about the publication of assessment reports, the panel concludes that SQAA has not fully addressed the issue.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends SQAA publishing all reports including those with a negative outcome in the case of initial accreditation procedures for reasons of transparency and further development.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel suggests including the outcomes of appeal procedures, if any, in the agency's accreditation decisions.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

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.

Evidence

Appeals

While including some repetitions that could have been avoided, the SAR (p. 49 sq.) describes in details the possibility of appeals offered to the institutions against the decisions of the council, and the role and composition of the Appeal Committee. The institutions are in each case informed by the council about how and when to lodge an appeal. The SAR summarizes some of the cases brought to the Appeal Committee and observes a decreasing trend in the recent years. If the appeal is accepted, the matter is returned to the council for reconsideration. The Appeal Committee's decision is not published, as the panel learned during the site visit, but taken into account in the new council decision. The Appeal Committee's decision cannot be contested by a new appeal, but can be challenged in front of the administrative court for both procedural and material arguments (HEA, Art. 51 K, last sentence). According to the member of the Appeal Committee who was heard, the publication of the Committee's decision would not pose problems, at least in an anonymised form or in an abridged form limited to legal principles or interpretations adopted by the Committee.

Complaints

The SAR is less clear about the complaint process, as defined by the ESG guidelines (ways "to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out"). It uses the word "complaint" in many places to describe appeals (e.g. p. 51, § 2). However, it gives examples that show that incorrect behaviour can be brought to the council for redress (exclusion of an expert for partiality, SER p. 52).

During the site visit, the panel learned that following the administrative rules in force in Slovenia, HEIs can form complaints, for example if an expert's way of asking questions is improper, and that HEIs will ask the council to intervene. This kind of process is, however, not explicitly described on the agency's website.

Analysis

The panel observes that the appeals system in place clearly meets the requisites of ESG 2.7. To better inform the public about the interpretation of the rules and standards, the panel suggests publishing the Appeal Committee's decisions in an appropriate way (see also ESG 2.6).

As for complaints, the site visit allows also the panel to conclude that ESG 2.7 is respected since in fact, this possibility exists. However, clarity requires that the complaint process as defined by the ESG be clearly explained and communicated to HEIs, as well as to other stakeholders – which the ESG does not impose – if the Slovenian system gives them a right to complain.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends SQAA specifying its complaints procedure as part of its quality assurance system and communicating this procedure more transparently to the institutions.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

CONCLUSION

OVERALL FINDINGS

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, complies with the ESG. The panel finds the agency fully compliant with three standards, substantially compliant with eight standards and partially compliant with three standards. SQAA is recommended to take appropriate action, as far as it is empowered to do so, to achieve full compliance with these standards at the earliest opportunity.

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

The panel commends SQAA for:

- ESG 2.2 – the future cooperation with the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) when reviewing the University of Ljubljana by way of experiment;
- ESG 2.2 – the shift from programme to institutional accreditation;
- ESG 2.4 – its extensive training of experts and the involvement of international experts in the training sessions.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The level of compliance for each ESG is as follows:

ESG Part 3

- 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance – substantially compliant
- 3.2 Official status – fully compliant
- 3.3 Independence – substantially compliant
- 3.4 Thematic analysis – partially compliant
- 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct – partially compliant
- 3.5 Resources – substantially compliant
- 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies – fully compliant

ESG Part 2

- 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance – fully compliant
- 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose – substantially compliant
- 2.3 Implementing processes – substantially compliant
- 2.4 Peer-review experts – substantially compliant
- 2.5 Criteria for outcomes – substantially compliant
- 2.6 Reporting – partially compliant
- 2.7 Complaints and appeals – substantially compliant

The panel recommends SQAA on the following issues:

- ESG 3.1 – The panel recommends SQAA exploring ways to ensure the full commitment of all stakeholders to the external quality assurance process;
- ESG 3.3. – The panel recommends SQAA paying due attention to maintain the agency's independence and making good use of the available instruments;

- ESG 3.4 – The panel recommends SQAA developing a method for the production and dissemination of thematic analyses on issues which are relevant to its stakeholders;
- ESG 3.5 – The panel recommends SQAA ensuring the necessary funding for the implementation of its strategy plan and subsequent action plans including a staff development plan;
- ESG 3.6 – The panel recommends SQAA including 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;
- ESG 3.6 – The panel recommends SQAA involving all its bodies in the conception and the implementation of its internal quality assurance policy. The panel feels that the agency's council as the highest decision-making body could lead the way and play a more active role;
- ESG 2.2 – The panel recommends SQAA applying the adopted methodology with a maximum of flexibility ensuring its fitness for purpose for all Slovenian institutions regardless size and profile. If need be, the methodology should be revised in order to make it more effective;
- ESG 2.2 – The panel recommends SQAA focusing on quality enhancement rather than quality control, and fostering the further development of a quality culture within Slovenian higher education;
- ESG 2.3 – The panel recommends SQAA determining the nature of the follow-up in its quality assurance processes, and not only in external assessments with a negative outcome;
- ESG 2.3 – The panel recommends SQAA developing a shared understanding of criteria and publishing the official interpretation of the criteria and regulations;
- ESG 2.4 – The panel recommends SQAA 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;
- ESG 2.5 – The panel recommends SQAA encouraging institutions to include consistent follow-up procedures in their internal quality assurance system;
- ESG 2.5 – The panel recommends SQAA formalising 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);
- ESG 2.6 – The panel recommends SQAA publishing all reports including those with a negative outcome in the case of initial accreditation procedures for reasons of transparency and further development;
- ESG 2.7 – The panel recommends SQAA specifying its complaints procedure as part of its quality assurance system and communicating this procedure more transparently to the institutions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

- The panel suggests inviting an international member to join the agency's council. It will increase SQAA's international knowhow and recognition status to the benefit of the agency and its stakeholders;

- The panel suggests involving more international experts in the agency's work to strengthen a public perception of SQAA's independence;
- The panel suggests providing all relevant documents also in English, screening the English translations of its documents, providing them with a date of publication and making them publicly available. In addition, the panel recommends developing clear guidelines for both HEIs and experts about the use of Slovenian and any foreign language during the proceedings, both during the interviews and in writing;
- The panel suggests SQAA including the approval of HEI's with the proposed panel composition as a formal step in the external assessment process. This could foster the notion of a peer review;
- The panel suggests including the outcomes of appeal procedures, if any, in the agency's accreditation decisions.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

2nd ENQA Review of SQAA

Programme of the site visit
10 - 13 June 2018
Ljubljana, Slovenia

Day 1 – Sunday 10 June 2018

(Hotel meeting room)

14.00 – 16.00 Panel meeting: kick-off review and preparations for day 2 (*closed meeting*)
(120')

1. Jean-Marc Rapp PhD (chair), President of Swiss Accreditation Council, Professor at the University of Lausanne, Law Faculty, Director of the Business Law Center, Switzerland [EUA nominee];
2. Michèle Wera MA (secretary), Policy advisor Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), the Netherlands [ENQA nominee];
3. Mirko Savić PhD, Full Professor at Faculty of Economics and Centre for Applied Statistics, University of Novi Sad, Member of Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA), Serbia [ENQA nominee];
4. Marija Vasilevska BA, Master's student at Iustinianus Primus Law Faculty, University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, Macedonia [ESU nominee].

Agnė Grajauskienė, ENQA Reviews Manager and ENQA coordinator SQAA review.

16.00 – 17.00 Introduction to the agency
(60')

Presentation about the specific national/legal context and quality assurance system in which SQAA operates by Klemen Šubic, SQAA Area Undersecretary

17.00 – 19.00 Panel meeting continued (*closed meeting*)
(120')

Day 2 – Monday 11 June 2018

(SQAA premises)

9.00-9.45 Panel meeting: preparation for day 2 (*closed meeting*)
(45')

9.45-10.30 Session 1 - SQAA Director
(45')

dr. Franci Demšar

Director since 3 April 2018

- 10.45-11.30** **Session 2 - SQAA team responsible for SER (interpreter)**
(45')
- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Klemen Šubic | Area Undersecretary |
| Barbara Zupančič Kočar | Area Secretary |
| Mateja Bajuk Malešič | Area I Senior Adviser |
- 11.45-12.45** **Session 3 - SQAA Council**
(60')
- | | |
|---|----------------|
| dr. Aleš Rotar | Vice-President |
| appointed by Employers' association of Slovenia | |
| prof. dr. Jernej Letnar Černič | Member |
| appointed by Association of independent higher education institutions | |
| assoc. prof. dr. Peter Purg | Member |
| appointed by Slovenian Rectors Conference | |
| Matic Kašnik | Student-member |
| appointed by Slovenian Student Union in cooperation with the student councils | |
- 13.00-14.30** **Panel meeting during lunch (*closed meeting*)**
(90')
- 14.45-15.30** **Session 4 - Representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport**
(45')
- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| prof. dr. Maja Makovec Brenčič | Minister for Education, Science and Sport |
| dr. Tomaž Boh | State Secretary |
| dr. Stojan Sorčan | Director-General of the Higher Education Directorate |
- 15.45-16.30** **Session 5 - Representatives of HEIs**
(45')
- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| prof.dr. Igor Papič | Rector, University of Ljubljana |
| prof.dr. Dragan Marušič | Rector, University of Primorska |
| prof.dr. Danilo Zavrtanik | Rector, University of Nova Gorica |
| prof. dr. Nataša Vaupotič | Vice-Rector, University of Maribor |
| prof. dr. Matjaž Škabar | Chairman, The Community of independent HEIs |
| prof. dr. Rasto Ovin | Dean, DOBA Faculty |
- 16.45-17.30** **Session 6 - Former SQAA Director**
(45')
- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| Prof. dr. Ivan Leban | Former SQAA Director |
|----------------------|----------------------|
- 17.30-18.30** **Panel meeting continued: wrap-up and preparations for day 3 (*closed meeting*)**
(60')

Day 3 – Tuesday 12 June 2018

(SQAA premises)

- 8.30-9.00** **Panel meeting (*closed meeting*)**
(30')

9.00-9.30 (30')	Session 7 - Appeal Committee (interpreter)	
	Majda Kocmur	Vice-Chair
9.45-10.30 (45')	Session 8 - SQAA staff	
	dr. Matjaž Štuhec	Quality Department
	Maja Milas	General Affairs, Quality Department
	Mag. Jernej Širok	Quality Department
	Gregor Rebernik	Quality Department
	Tatjana Horvat	Quality Department
	Andrej Krček	Quality Department
10.45-11.30 (45')	Session 9 - Student representatives	
	Jaka Trilar	President, SSU (Slovenian Student Union)
	Alen Brkić	SSU
	Nassim Djaba	Student Council University of Primorska, President
	Žan Bokan	Student
	Laura Koudela	Student Council University of Ljubljana, President
	Matej Mušič	Student Council of Independent HEIs
11.45-12.30 (45')	Session 10 - SQAA experts including 2 student-experts	
	Igor Jesih	Student expert
	Monika Sobočan	Student expert (Skype)
	prof. dr. Marinka Drobnič Košorok	Expert
	prof. dr. Andreja Cirman	Expert
	prof. dr. Lucija Čok	Expert
	prof. dr. Bojan Dolšak	Expert
	Anthony F. Camilleri	International Expert from Malta
12.45-13.15 (30')	Session 11 – SQAA International experts (Skype)	
	Dr. Saša Nikšič	International expert from Croatia
	dr. Bastian Baumann	International expert from Germany
13. 15-14.30 (75')	Panel meeting during lunch (<i>closed meeting</i>)	
14.30-15.15 (45')	Session 12 – QA Managers of HEIs	
	izr. prof. dr. Lučka Lorber	University of Maribor
	prof. dr. Iztok Arčon	University of Nova Gorica
	izr. prof. dr. Tomaž Deželan	University of Ljubljana
	Alicia-Leonor Sauli-Miklavčič	HVC, Technical School Center Maribor
	dr. Barbara Toplak Perović	Alma Mater Europaea, ECM

15.30-16.15 (45')	Session 13 – Representatives of other stakeholders involved in HE	
	akad. dr. Alojz Kralj	Vice-President, Academy of Sciences and Arts
	Samo Hribar Milič	Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia
	prof. dr. Peter Jambrek	Sociologist, jurist, politician and intellectual
	Mitja Jermol	IJS, Opening Up Slovenia
	Branimir Štrukelj	Trade Union
	Ranka Ivelja	Journalist Dnevnik

16.30-17.30 **Panel meeting continued: wrap-up and preparations for day 4**
(60') **(closed meeting)**

Day 4 – Wednesday 13 June 2018
(SQAA premises)

8.30-9.00 (30')	Panel meeting (closed meeting)	
9.00-9.30 (30')	Session 14 – eNakvis information system provider including a demonstration	
	Aleš Kumer	PRIMASA d.o.o., eNakvis
	Andrej Krček	SQAA
9.45-10.30 (45')	Session 15 – SQAA Director	
	dr. Franci Demšar	Director
	Klemen Šubic	Area Undersecretary
10.30-14.30 (4u)	Final panel meeting including lunch (closed meeting)	
14.45-15.15 (30')	Final de-briefing meeting with SQAA about the panel's preliminary findings	
	dr. Franci Demšar	Director
	SQAA staff	
	SQAA stakeholders	

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

External review of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

December 2017

1. Background and Context

The Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA/NAKVIS) is a public body legally established on the grounds of Higher Education Act by the Republic of Slovenia to assure and enhance quality in higher education and to carry out development and consulting activities in this field. The Agency took over the tasks of the previous Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia and started with its operations on 5 March 2010.

SQAA provides for the development and functioning of the quality assurance system in higher education in Slovenia. It operates responsibly in terms of form and contents and counsels all stakeholders and participants in tertiary education in line with the European and global directions of development.

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

SQAA priority is the concern for the quality of Slovenian higher education as well as the integration into international environment and cooperation with relevant stakeholders while taking into account the ESG.

SQAA has been a member of ENQA since 6 March 2015 and is reapplying for renewal of membership. SQAA is applying for renewal of its membership in ENQA well before the due time i.e. March 2020. There are two main reasons for this action. SQAA is preparing the requested Self-Assessment Report (SAR) according to the new European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG 2015) following the order of the ENQA membership criteria and SQAA would like also to apply for renewal of EQAR registration (admission valid until 31 July 2018). Previously, SQAA passed consecutively two external evaluations - one for EQAR in 2013 and later, one for ENQA in 2014, in accord with the Resolution on National Programme of Higher Education 2011-2020. Higher Education Act changed in Nov 2016 and SQAA adapted the criteria for accreditations and evaluations accordingly.

SQAA has been registered on EQAR since 31 July 2013 and is applying for renewal of the registration.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This review, will evaluate the way in which and to what extent SQAA fulfils the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of SQAA should be reconfirmed and to EQAR to support SQAA application to the register. The review panel is not expected, however, to make any judgements as regards granting membership.

2.1 Activities of SQAA within the scope of the ESG

In order for SQAA to re-apply for ENQA membership and for renewal of registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities of the SQAA that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is regardless of whether these activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA, and whether they are obligatory or voluntary.

In December 2016 Amendments to the Higher Education Act were enforced. In 2017 new Criteria for Accreditation and External Evaluation of HEI and Study programmes and Criteria for International Cooperation were implemented. The amendments of Law and By-laws foresee a transition to institutional re-accreditation, they are implementing the European approach for QA of Joint Programmes, integrating all Standards and following the Guidelines of renewed ESG (Yerevan, 2015).

The core activities of SQAA are:

- Initial accreditation and re-accreditation of HEIs;
- Accreditation of new study programmes;
- Accreditation of external evaluations;
- External evaluation and extraordinary evaluation of HEI and of study programmes and evaluation of a sample of study programmes (at least 2% of all accredited study programmes shall be evaluated each year);
- Notifications of internationally accredited joint study programmes and notification of study programmes of the International Association of universities – EMUNI;
- Transnational higher education/cross-border education.

Furthermore, the external review report should also address the implementation of the European approach for QA of Joint Programmes as well as (if the case) how SQAA's ensures that the decisions taken on the basis of reviews carried out by other agencies are in line with the ESG, especially in case the agency is not registered on EQAR.

3. The Review Process

The process is designed in the light of the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in line with the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol for the review;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- Self-assessment by SQAA including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to SQAA;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Follow-up of the panel's and/or ENQA Board's recommendations by the agency, including a voluntary follow-up visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts, an academic employed by a higher education institution, student member, and eventually a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members will serve as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews 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. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency under review. In this case an additional fee to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses is applied.

In addition to the four members, the panel will be supported by the ENQA Secretariat review coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA expectations are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member 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 SQAA with the list of suggested experts with their respective curriculum vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards SQAA review.

3.2 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 is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part II and III) addressed individually. All agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.
- 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 meets the ESG and thus the requirements of ENQA membership.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat who has 4 weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case 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 reject the report and ask for a revised version within 4 weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 € will be charged to the agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

SQAA will draw up a draft proposal of the schedule for the site visit to be submitted to the review panel at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is 2,5 days. 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 review panel will be assisted by SQAA in arriving in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the granting or reconfirmation of ENQA membership.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language and it will be then submitted to SQAA within 11 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If SQAA chooses to provide a 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, finalise the document and submit it to ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG*, so as to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR.

SQAA is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation applying for membership and the ways in which SQAA expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be discussed along with the final evaluation report.

4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

SQAA will consider the expert panel's report and will publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has made its decision. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. SQAA commits to preparing a follow-up plan in which it addresses the recommendations of the review panel and to submitting a follow-up report to the ENQA Board. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report will be complemented by a small-scale visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered as of particular importance or challenge by SQAA. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or compliance of the agency with the ESG. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

5. Use of the report

ENQA shall retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the expert panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, shall be vested in ENQA.

The review report is used by the Board of ENQA for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether SQAA has met the ESG and can be thus admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The report will also be used for registration on EQAR, and is designed so as to serve these two purposes. However, the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by the ENQA Board. Once submitted to SQAA and ENQA and until it is approved by the Board the report may not be used or relied upon by SQAA, the panel and any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. SQAA may use the report at its discretion only after the Board has approved of the report. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on membership.

The Chair of the panel shall remain available to respond to questions of clarification or further information from the EQAR Register Committee provided that the ENQA Secretariat is copied in all such requests.

6. Budget

SQAA shall pay the following review related fees:

Fee of the Chair	4,500 EUR
Fee of the Secretary	4,500 EUR
Fee of the 2 other panel members	4,000 EUR (2,000 EUR each)
Fee of 2 panel members for follow-up visit	1,000 EUR (500 EUR each)
Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat	7,000 EUR
Experts Training fund	1,400 EUR
Approximate travel and subsistence expenses	6,000 EUR
Travel and subsistence expenses follow-up visit	1,600 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30,000.00 EUR VAT excl. for a review team of 4 members. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, SQAA will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget, and will refund the difference to SQAA if the travel and subsistence expenses go under budget.

The fee of the follow-up visit is included in the overall cost of the review and will not be reimbursed in case the agency does not wish to benefit from it.

In the event of a second site visit required by the Board and aiming at completing the assessment of compliance, and should the agency accept a second visit, an additional fee of 500 EUR per expert, as well as travel and subsistence costs are recoverable from the agency.

7. Indicative Schedule of the Review

Agreement on terms of reference	December 2017
Appointment of review panel members	February 2018
Self-assessment completed	By 1 st of March 2018
Pre-screening of SAR by ENQA coordinator	March 2018
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	April 2018
Briefing of review panel members	May 2018
Review panel site visit	Early June 2018
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA for pre-screening	July 2018
Draft of evaluation report to SQAA	August 2018
Statement of SQAA to review panel if necessary	Early September 2018
Submission of final report to ENQA	By Mid-September 2018
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board and response of SQAA	October 2018
Publication of the report	October/November 2018

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

AQ Austria	Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria
CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
CHERS	Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia (after 2004)
Council	Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia (1994 until 2004)
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EIQAS	Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance System
eNakvis	information system of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESF	European Social Fund
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
ESU	European Student Union
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
eVŠ	record-keeping and analytical information system for higher education in Slovenia
HE	higher education
HEA	Higher Education Act
HEA-K	Act Amending the Higher Education Act (2016)
HEI	higher education institution
NAKVIS	Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
NCQHE	National Commission for the Quality of Higher Education
PAA	Public Agencies Act
QA	quality assurance
SAR	self-assessment report
SQAA	Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SSU	Slovenian Students' Union
THE	transnational higher education

ANNEX 4: DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY SQAA (CF. LIST OF REFERENCE IN SAR)

1. Self-Evaluation Report for 2016 and 2017
2. Annex 1 Mapping table ESG (institutional accreditation)
3. Annex 2 Mapping table ESG (programme accreditation)
4. Annex 3 Quality Manual
5. Annex 4 Report on Work and Operation of the Agency in 2016
6. Annex 5 Work and financial plan 2017
7. Annex 6 SQAA Strategic development for the period 2017-2020
8. Annex 7 Criteria for accreditation and external evaluation of HEIs and study programmes (2017)
9. Annex 8 Criteria for international cooperation (2017)
10. Annex 9 Criteria for SQAA experts (2018)
11. Annex 10 SAR for 2015
12. Annex 11 SAR 2016 – 2017 (original, according to SQAA Quality Manual)
13. Annex 12 Report on the Quality in Slovenian Higher Education and Higher Vocational Education in the Period from 2014 – 2017

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY SQAA

1. Updates Annex 1 and 2: Mapping ESG and SKVC methodologies for each activity (May 2018)
2. Revised version of mapping summary table ESG (June 2018)
3. Article 51e-z, Act Amending the Higher Education Act (2016)
4. Folder SQAA (June 2018)
5. Site Visit Protocol
6. Presentation SQAA on quality assurance and Slovenian Higher Education (June 2018)
7. Presentation former SQAA director: Few facts about Slovenian HEA (June 2018) and additional statement by email
8. CVs of SQAA staff members
9. Statement of non-conflict of interest, for experts, employees, council members [in Slovenian]
10. Training material, for new employees and experts including students [in Slovenian]
11. Minutes of meetings of the council [in Slovenian]
12. Sample reports of external evaluations [in Slovenian]
13. Procedural Act [in Slovenian]
14. Various templates (e.g. Council decision; Formal nomination of experts) [in Slovenian]

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

1. SQAA website [in Slovenian and English]
2. SQAA Report of the External Review of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA), January 2015
3. ENQA decision on membership SQAA (18 March 2015)
4. ENQA acknowledgement of SQAA's follow-up report to the 2015 external review report (8 June 2017)
5. ENQA Terms of Reference External Review SQAA (December 2017)
6. EQAR Confirmation of Eligibility: Application for Renewal of Registration Application no. A62 of 15/11/2017 (8 December 2017)

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA), undertaken in 2018.



2018 ENQA AGENCY REVIEW