



SELF- EVALUATION

AGENCY FOR SCIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION



agency for science and higher education

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) has drafted this Self-Evaluation Report for the purposes of an international review carried out by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) for extending membership in that organisation as well as listing in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The Self-Evaluation outlines the Agency's compliance with *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), within the context of the Croatian system of science and higher education. The Self-Evaluation contains information and data obtained in the past five years from various sources, including expert panel members, higher education institutions and other stakeholders, for purposes of improving Agency's business processes and activities.

As a full member of the European Union, Croatia prioritises the European dimension in higher education and science. In order to create a competitive higher education, the Agency strives to contribute to the European dimension by carrying out external evaluation procedures.

Quality assurance in higher education and science is a relatively new concept in Croatia. A quality assurance system presupposes the existence of national laws and regulations, as well as bodies responsible for carrying out procedures of external evaluation, while promoting the importance of quality culture, observing European and professional and international trends and improving the existing procedures. Being the national agency for the implementation of external evaluation, ASHE is faced with the challenge of laying the foundation, building and strengthening of these processes.

At the very beginning, the Agency's activities were aimed at raising awareness in higher education institutions and the entire system of higher education of the importance of internal and external evaluation for the development of quality culture. That did not just involve the fulfilment

of the standards and criteria, i.e. the formalities; among the Agency's goals was also to help higher education institutions improve their activities and encourage them to prioritise quality.

As we come to an end of the first five-year cycle of external evaluation, we can conclude that the original goal was achieved. Higher education institutions, other stakeholders and the general public recognise the importance of quality assurance, with many positive changes having taken place at the level of institutions and the system as a whole. These changes encourage higher education institutions to improve their activities, and ASHE to continue its work.

At the end of the first cycle, it is important to add that the Agency has also been expanding and developing over the last couple of years, taking into account the feedback from stakeholders and considering the changes in its environment, such as Croatia's accession to the European Union, the adoption of the new *Strategy for Education, Science and Technology*, the adoption of the *Act on Croatian Qualifications Framework*, internationalisation of higher education, academic and research mobility, etc. It is in line with these changes and the European and international trends that ASHE expects to face new challenges.

The Agency will continue to promote the importance of quality assurance and further advance the Croatian area of higher education, together with other stakeholders, in order to make it attractive for Croatian and foreign students, scientists and professors, and to make the Croatian higher education institutions desirable places of study, work and cooperation.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

For the purpose of making the Self-Evaluation, a work team has been established at the level of the Agency in 2015, tasked with drafting the document. Each team member, within his or her duties, has been in charge of a particular part of the Self-Evaluation, followed by joint meetings. Their first task was to gather all the analyses and feedback which would be used in the drafting of the Self-Evaluation. They include the following documents:

- ASHE 2011 Self-Evaluation;
- Report on the external review of ASHE, 2011;
- ENQA's letter to ASHE dated February 1st, 2012 with a request for confirmation of ASHE's independence from the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports in making judgments, and ASHE's response to ENQA dated February 7th, 2012 in which this is confirmed;
- EQAR's Approval of the Application by ASHE for Inclusion on the Register of November 21st, 2011. The following issues were flagged for particular attention when considering a potential application for renewal of inclusion: ESG 2.1 and 2.4, due to possible unnecessary duplications or overlaps in the procedures (audit and re-accreditation), and ESG 2.5 due to potential problems regarding the easy accessibility and readability of ASHE reports;
- ASHE's Progress Report to ENQA on the implementation of the recommendations stated in the External Review Report dated September 24th, 2013;
- The new ESG and EQAR's interpretation of the Parts II and III of the ESG;
- ASHE's letter to EQAR dated October 13th, 2015, with the plan for adaptation to the new ESGs;
- ENQA Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews;
- EQAR's letter to ASHE dated February 12th, 2016, stating that the Register Committee for ASHE review should check compliance of external audit, re-accreditation and initial accreditation in higher education, as well as thematic evaluation and evaluation in

science, with the ESG, if they are considered to be within the scope of ESG. As EQAR confirmed in that letter, activities that are not considered within the scope of the ESG, such as admissions to higher education institutions, gathering of information, recognition of foreign higher education qualifications and the support to the bodies within the system of higher education and science, do not have comply with ESG. Finally, they reminded ASHE of the need to deal more closely with the issues regarding the overlap in the processes (ESG 2.1 and 2.2) and the contents and accessibility of reports (ESG 2.6).

The documents, therefore, include the *Report on the External Review of ASHE* for membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR, carried out in 2011, and the subsequent communication with ENQA and EQAR as part of the follow-up procedure, adjustment to the new version of the ESG and the preparation for the following external review.

Moreover, various types of feedback were available to ASHE, including surveys sent to higher education institutions that had undergone evaluation and those sent to expert panels that carried them out, as well as other forms of study of stakeholders' attitudes within the scope of the projects carried out in collaboration with other agencies, higher education institutions and civil society organisations, and through regular informing of the public, to mention the annual reports and ASHE's *Overview of Activities from 2009 to 2015*. All the feedback gathered over the past five years had already been analysed and used to adjust ASHE processes, and the team's task was to make a short review of the changes made. Given that the legal framework governing ASHE activities and internal regulations did not undergo any fundamental changes, the task of making the first draft of the Self-Evaluation consisted primarily of adjusting the changes already described in the first external review to the new version of the ESG by placing an emphasis on the evidence gathered in the last five years that may shed new light on the effectiveness and fitness-for-purpose of ASHE processes.

ASHE notified all competent authorities in higher education about the external review and the Self-Evaluation drafting plan in January 2016. When the first draft of the Self-Evaluation was completed, it was sent for comments to all members of the ASHE Governing Board and the Accreditation Council. After their comments had been incorporated, it was officially sent for

comments to stakeholder representative bodies in Croatia: the Rectors' Conference, the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, and student and employer organisations. Finally, in June 2016 the final version was published online, providing also the general public with the opportunity to send comments. The final version underwent further changes when incorporating comments on its content and clarity given by the ENQA staff.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION AND QA OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE AGENCY

3.1. Higher Education System in Croatia

The Croatian higher education system is regulated by the *Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education (Annex 1)*, and the competent ministry is the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (hereinafter: the Ministry). The Act went through a number of amendments as the system has in the last ten years been undergoing a process of reform, set in motion by the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 2001, which has been implemented since 2004. The first step in the reform was the reform of undergraduate, graduate and professional study programmes in line with the Bologna principles in 2005, when the 3-cycle study model and ECTS credit system were introduced. Postgraduate doctoral study programmes were adapted in 2005–2009. In the same period there was an increase in the number of newly established higher education institutions: 30 higher education institutions, mainly colleges, and a large number of polytechnics were established. Most were public, established in underdeveloped or regions hit by war, in line with the strategic orientation of the Republic of Croatia towards a polycentric development of higher education. First private universities were also founded during that period. This trend started to change after 2009 when ASHE was tasked with external evaluation procedures. Only one higher education institution (HEI) – a private college - has been established since then, and several have been closed or merged with other higher education institutions.

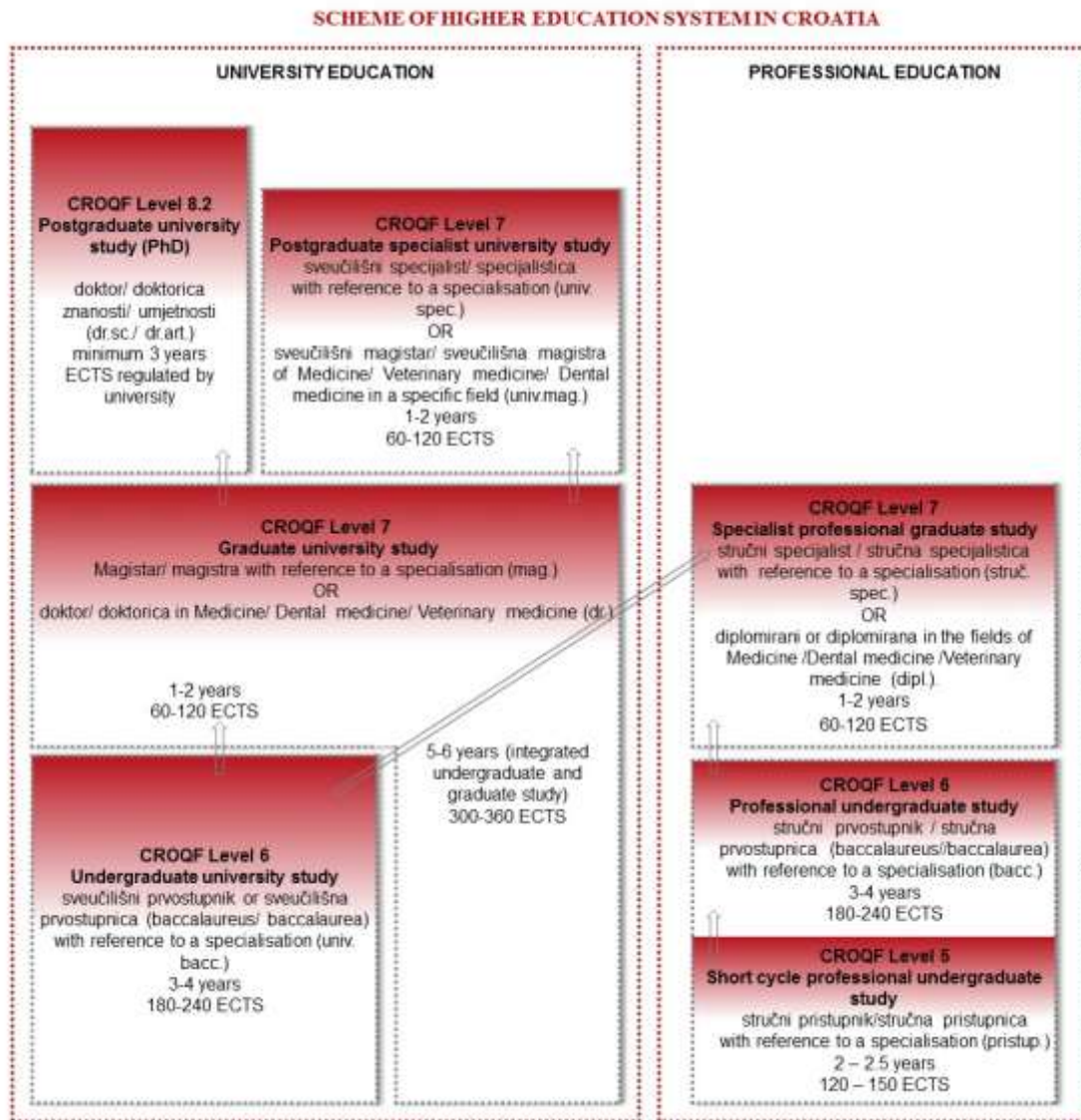
The development of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CroQF) started in 2006. The report on integration with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area was presented at the meeting of the EQF Advisory Group in 2012. The *Act on Croatian Qualifications Framework* was adopted in 2013, while the *Ordinance on Croatian Qualifications Framework* was adopted in 2014, laying the foundation for further implementation of the CroQF. Qualifications are not entered into the Framework automatically, but only after relevant Occupational and Qualification Standards have been developed. Ongoing Ministry projects fund the higher education institutions which are working on developing such standards and reforming their study programmes. ASHE has participated in developing the Framework and will be tasked with evaluating higher education programmes against the Standards once they are developed.

Two significant changes were introduced in the Croatian education system in 2010 – the State Matura at the end of a four-year secondary education, and an information system for applications to higher education institutions. State Matura exams have replaced the old entrance exams at higher education institutions, and the application and enrolment process is now performed online, vastly increasing the transparency of the procedure, which is partly administered by the ASHE Central Applications Office.

In 2014, Croatian Parliament adopted the *2014-2020 Strategy for Education, Science and Technology*. The Strategy outlined the continuation of the reform started in 2004, calling for measures such as the rationalisation of the number of study programmes, adaptation of learning outcomes to labour market needs via the Qualifications Framework, and further increasing institutional autonomy through performance agreements.

Higher education in the Republic of Croatia is carried out through university and professional study programmes. University study programmes qualify students to work in science and higher education, private and public sector and society in general, as well as to develop and apply scientific and professional knowledge. Professional study programmes provide students with an appropriate level of knowledge and skills required to work in applied professions, as well as a direct integration in the working process.

Image 1: System of higher education in Croatia



Source: ASHE, 2015

There are currently 1370 accredited study programmes in the Republic of Croatia.

Table 1: Number of study programmes, by programme type / HEI type

Study programme type	Public university	Private university	Public polytechnic	Private polytechnic	Public college	Private college	Public and private university	Total
Undergraduate university study programmes	340	8						348
Graduate university study programmes	380	6						386
Integrated undergraduate and graduate university study programmes	52							52
Postgraduate specialist study programmes	221						1	222
Postgraduate university (doctoral) study programmes	121							121
Short-term professional study programmes	1							1
Undergraduate professional study programmes	55		53	17	4	37		166
Specialist graduate study programmes	16		22	12	4	20		74
TOTAL	1186	14	75	29	8	57	1	1370

Source: ASHE, 2016

Higher education institutions in Croatia are universities (and their constituents - faculties and academies of arts), polytechnics and colleges. A university is an institution organising and delivering university study programmes, and, exceptionally, professional study programmes. Polytechnics and colleges organise and deliver professional study programmes. There are currently 119 higher education institutions in Croatia: 8 public universities, 2 private universities, 68 faculties and academies and 1 public university centre, 4 private polytechnics, 11 public polytechnics, 22 private colleges and 3 public colleges. There were 178 676 students enrolled in Croatian higher education institutions in the academic year 2013/2014.

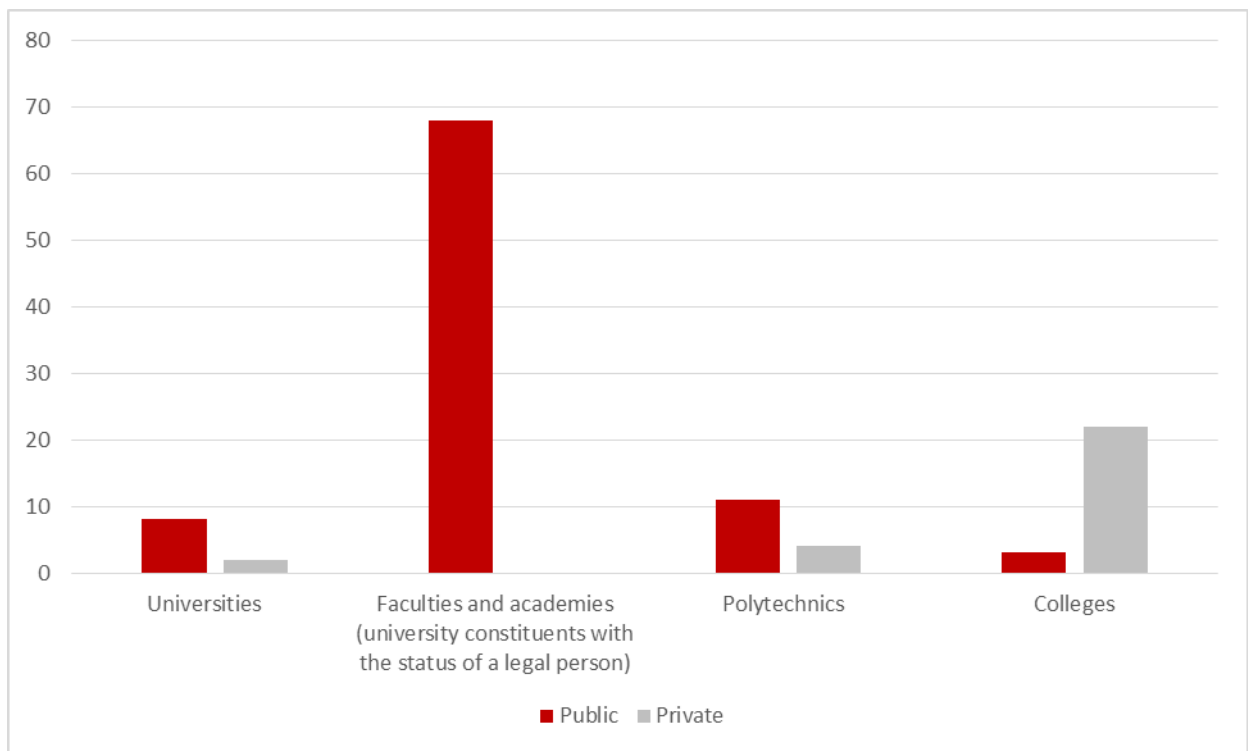


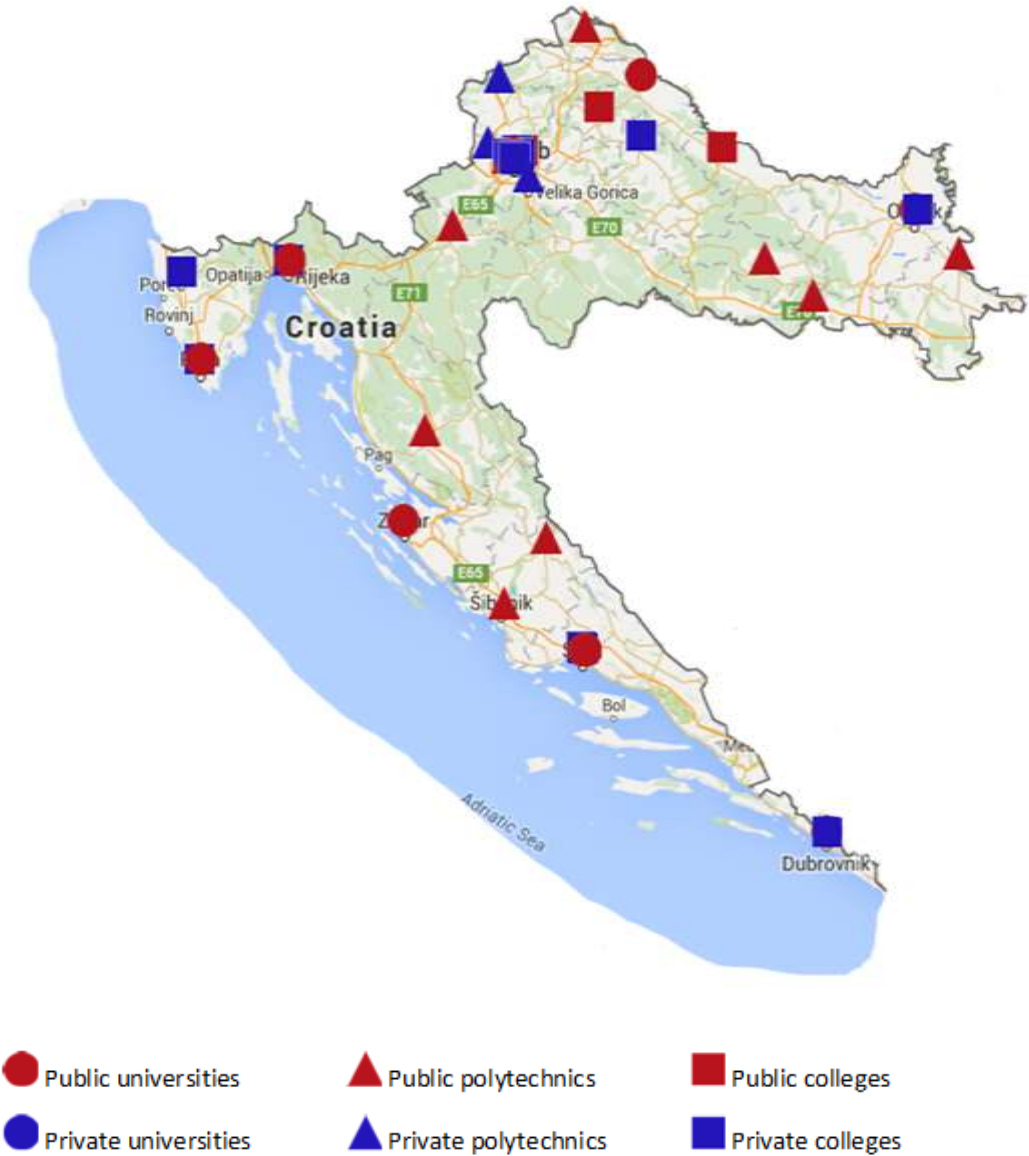
Chart 1: Number of higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia

Source: ASHE, 2016

Higher education institutions have varying degrees of collaboration with research institutes. As certain other public and private organisations, universities and a part of higher education institutions, research institutes are defined by law as scientific organisations. These include 25

public research institutes, 86 institutions comprising public universities and their constituents, polytechnics, colleges and two private universities, and 68 other private institutions with a research unit (32 public and 36 private institutions).

Image 2: Map of Croatia with higher education institutions



Source: ASHE, 2016

In carrying out external evaluation procedures, the Agency takes into account the fact that Croatia has a binary system of higher education, that is, the level of universities and the level of polytechnics and colleges (which can only professional, first and second cycle programmes). The latter have a distinctly professional character and mostly include younger institutions with a predominantly regional character, and a slightly different approach has to be taken in evaluating this type of institutions.

Croatian education system has other specificities which had to be taken into consideration by the Agency during external evaluation procedures. This primarily refers to the fact that out of the eight public universities in Croatia, four largest universities are not fully integrated universities, but consist of constituents (faculties and academies) with the status of a legal entity. Therefore, external evaluation procedures at these universities were organized at their constituents (faculties), and not at the university level. Other peculiarities of the Croatian system of higher education refer to the manner of recruitment and promotion of teachers (regulated at the national level), as well as some aspects of the system of higher education financing (e.g. public institutions' staff salaries are determined and paid by the state), and foreign expert panels have to be well-prepared and informed about them.

Specific also is the development of internal quality assurance system at Croatian higher education institutions, which started after 2005 in line with *Educational Sector Development Plan 2005-2010* adopted by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. According to the Plan, Croatian higher education institutions were obligated to establish internal quality assurance units, which was also included as one of the necessary criteria for accreditation. External evaluation procedures carried out in the last decade, as well as a variety of educational activities carried out by ASHE, provided a strong impetus to the development of internal quality assurance systems, and it is exactly ASHE's mission to foster the importance of quality assurance in higher education and science in order to permanently improve the quality of higher education institutions and scientific organizations.

4. HISTORY, PROFILE AND ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY

The development of quality assurance system in Croatian higher education started in the 1990s with the establishment of the National Council for Higher Education, the top expert body in charge of the development of quality in higher education. In addition to having a strategic role, this body had the task of conducting external evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes. For the most part the procedures involved the establishment of new higher education institutions and/or study programmes, and the plan was made at the time to evaluate all higher education institutions.

A significant step forward in the development of quality assurance system in Croatian higher education was made in 2005, with the establishment of the Agency for Science and Higher Education. The legal framework that was in force stipulated that the Agency provides technical and administrative support to the National Council for Higher Education in the implementation of external evaluation in higher education. Under those circumstances, evaluation of all study programmes harmonized with Bologna principles was carried out from 2005 to 2009. Although the plan was to also evaluate all higher education institutions in Croatia, it was only partially implemented; only 21 higher education institutions underwent evaluation due to legislative changes enacted in 2009.

The *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Annex 2)* was adopted in 2009, and the Agency for Science and Higher Education became the only national body responsible for carrying out external evaluation in higher education and science, in accordance with the ESG and good international practice. This further emphasized the independence of Agency's work and removed the obstacles that prevented full compliance with the ESG. The National Council for Higher Education (now called the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development) is no longer involved in external evaluation procedures, but has become the top strategic body in the system of higher education, science and technology.

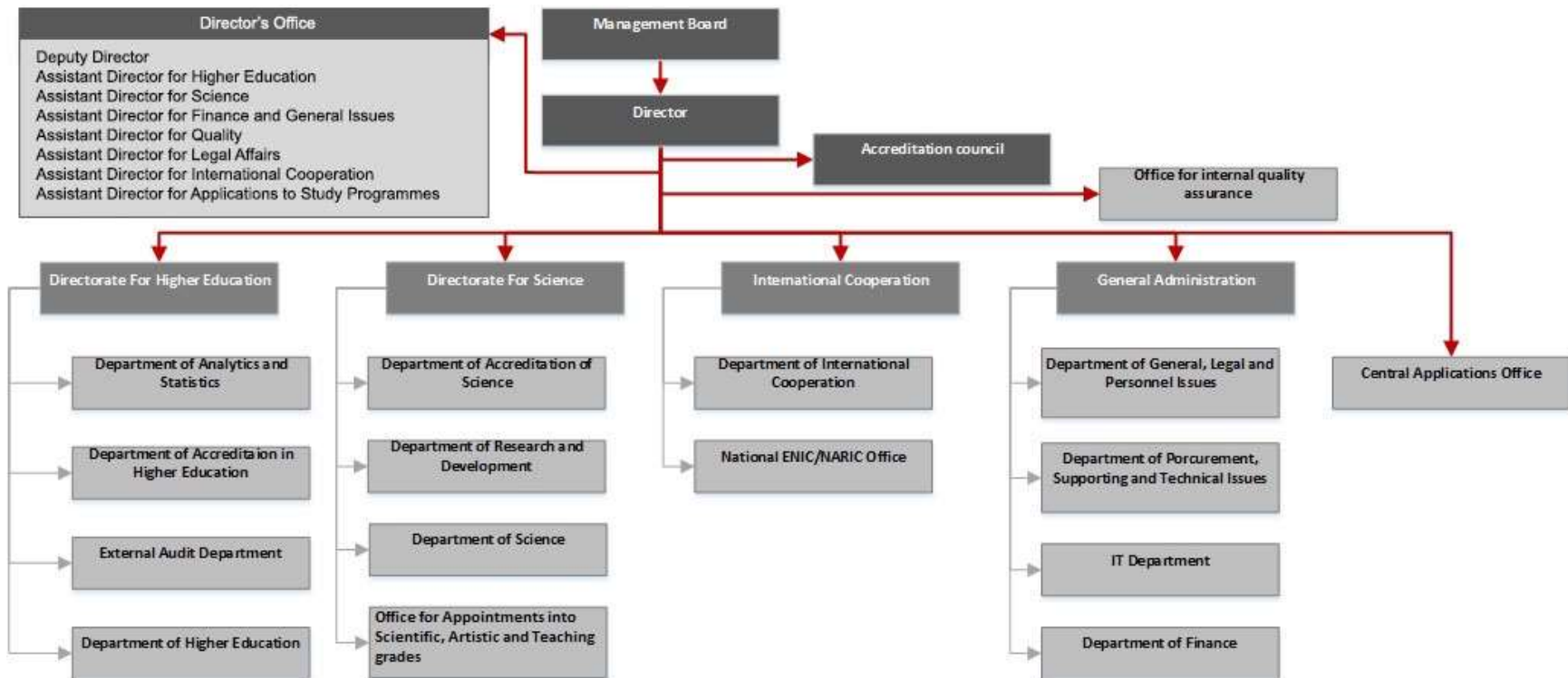
ASHE bodies are the Management Board, Director and the Accreditation Council. The **Management Board** supervises the work of ASHE and reaches decisions pertaining to its activities. ASHE Management Board consists of a chair and eight members appointed for a four-year term. Chair of the Board and seven of its members are appointed by the Croatian Parliament; chair and two members are proposed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, one member is proposed by the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, two members are proposed by the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development, and one member by the Croatian Student Council. ASHE appoints one member of the Management Board from the ranks of its employees, in accordance with the provisions of the Labour Act. The Board adopts the *Statute of the Agency (Annex 4)* on the proposal of the director and, with the consent of the Ministry, appoints and discharges the director and assistant director of the Agency; following the proposal of the director, adopts Ordinance on Internal Organisation that closely regulates internal organisation of the Agency; adopts the Agency's annual work programme, which defines the Agency's activities and tasks for the current calendar year in detail, and monitors its implementation. Furthermore, the Management Board adopts the annual budget of the Agency following proposal of the director, adopts the financial report and the annual report on the Agency's activities, submitted by the director, and submits it to the Ministry and the Agency's founder. On the proposal of the director, the Management Board decides on the amount of remuneration for the services rendered, and decides, as a second instance body, on the employment and work rights of employees and performs other duties in accordance with the Agency's Statute and the law.

ASHE Director is Prof. Jasmina Havranek, PhD. The Director represents and acts on behalf of ASHE, organises and manages ASHE operations and professional activities. In addition, ASHE Director adopts other general acts from the scope of ASHE activities, independently carries out legal actions in the name and on behalf of ASHE up to the amount set by the *ASHE Statute (Annex 4)*, decides on the start and end of employment of ASHE employees, participates in activities of the Management Board without a right to make decisions, and selects external collaborators from the rank of scientists and experts for performing particular tasks concerning the ASHE activities and operations. To be appointed ASHE Director, a candidate has to have a

PhD and be appointed into the scientific-teaching grade of associate professor or full professor, or, alternatively, the grade of senior research associate or scientific adviser.

Accreditation Council is the professional council of the Agency that adopts documents related to external evaluation procedures and final opinions on the quality of higher education institutions and scientific organisations. Accreditation Council adopts the documents necessary for external evaluation procedures in higher education and science, establishes quality assessments criteria and indicators, adopts plans for the implementation of external evaluation procedures, appoints members of expert panels in external evaluation procedures, issues opinions on final expert panel reports in external evaluation procedures, appoints members of appeal committees in external evaluation procedures, produces annual reports on its work for the ASHE Director, proposes annual work plans for activities in its purview, appoints working bodies and organises their activities, and decides on other expert issues upon request of the Management Board and ASHE Director. As per the Agency *Statute (Annex 4)*, the Accreditation Council is composed of 11 members appointed for a four-year term by the ASHE Management Board, at the recommendation of ASHE Director. The members of the Council are nominated at the request of ASHE by the following bodies: Rectors' Conference, Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, Croatian Chamber of Economy, Croatian Student Council, National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development and scientific institutes, as well as academics through a public call. On the basis of these nominations, the Director proposes 11 candidates for the Accreditation Council, which are appointed by the Management Board. Associate members are appointed by the Accreditation Council decision upon the proposal of the Director and have no voting rights. The Director of the Agency participates in the activities of the Accreditation Council without voting rights. Public officials cannot become members of the Accreditation Council.

Organigram 1: ASHE Organisational Chart



Source: ASHE, 2016

In accordance with the *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Annex 2)*, ASHE is responsible for carrying out the following external quality assurance procedures: initial accreditation, re-accreditation and thematic evaluation of scientific organisations, higher education institutions and study programmes, and audit of quality assurance systems at higher education institutions. Each of these procedures has its own characteristics and a pre-defined process of implementation. What they have in common is quality assurance and improvement of each evaluated institution, study programme or part of activity, and the resulting advancement of the overall system of science and higher education. The external quality assurance procedures in higher education are discussed in more detail below, starting with Chapter 6.

ASHE has a dual role: it externally ensures the quality of Croatian HEIs, but as a nationally-funded body also seeks to support them in quality improvements within, but also outside its quality assurance procedures. ASHE staff thus regularly hold presentations and workshops on various topics connected to quality and implementation of the European Higher Education Area. The Agency also participates in enhancement-oriented projects with HEIs. To mention most recent examples, ASHE participated in two EU-funded projects, one aimed at improving recognition of non-formal and informal learning at Croatian HEIs, another aimed at improving the learning experience for various groups of disadvantaged students. It is currently involved into two EU-funded projects both aiming to improve human resource management and training at HEIs. Even when ASHE is not formally involved as a partner, ASHE staff are recognized for their expertise and often invited as speakers at project events or members of various task groups. Again as examples we can mention participation in a project aiming to develop a lifelong learning programme for administrators in higher education, funded by the U.S. Embassy and the EU; a project developing a qualification standard for teachers in primary and secondary education, and several projects dealing with the development of the Croatian Qualifications Framework. Although such projects can have as formal partners only some and never all Croatian HEIs, ASHE ensures that all HEIs can participate in project events, that the outputs and results are (at least) nationally disseminated, and that any guidelines and similar documents produced undergo national public discussion and are applicable to all Croatian HEIs.

In addition to quality assurance activities in higher education, ASHE carries out procedures of **external quality assurance in science**. Although this particular part of ASHE's work does not

have to comply with the ESG (given that the ESG is primarily intended for the evaluation of learning and teaching processes), some of the ESG guidelines were implemented in development of the evaluation model, as well as examples of good international practice used in science evaluation. The procedures modelled after those in higher education are initial accreditation and reaccreditation of scientific organisations which receive public funding, such as public and private research institutes, clinical hospitals, R&D departments of large companies, etc. A number of higher education institutions are also registered as scientific organisations and thus obliged by law to undergo these procedures, however ASHE combines their reaccreditation as scientific organisations with higher education reaccreditation, by asking the panels to also check additional criteria for scientific organisations, as is discussed in more detail below. In the past five years ASHE also performed a thematic evaluation of public research institutes, which was an ESG-aligned procedure aimed at producing a report on their efficiency and effectiveness. For the past two years it has participated in establishing “Scientific Centres of Excellence” by organising independent reviews of submitted proposals and providing administrative support to the bodies deciding on the results of the calls. The table below presents the number of procedures in science carried out by the end of 2015, with the number of reviewers and percentage of foreign reviewers.

Table 2: Evaluation in science

Procedure	No. of procedures	No. of reviewers	Percentage of foreign reviewers (%)
Initial accreditation for scientific activity	8	24	0
Re-accreditation of public research institutes	25	50	100
Re-accreditation of other scientific organisations	70	22	0

Source: ASHE, 2016

In 2012 ASHE was tasked by the Ministry to perform a thematic evaluation of doctoral programmes, which was a data collection exercise steered by an independent panel of academics.

The results of this thematic evaluation, published in a report, indicated a number of issues with the doctoral programmes in Croatia. Because these issues were also discussed in a number of reports from the reaccreditation of higher education institutions, and because it was deemed that more attention needs to be paid to this level of education than is possible within an institutional review, following a request by the Ministry ASHE launched a reaccreditation of doctoral study programmes. Because research is the key element of doctoral education, this reaccreditation, while it follows the regulations for reaccreditation of higher education institutions and is aligned with the ESG, is carried out by ASHE as a combination of science and higher education evaluation. It is discussed along other higher education evaluations in the remainder of this document.

ASHE also has a number of other tasks which are not directly related to quality assurance in higher education.

In accordance with the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education, the Central Applications Office (CAO) was established at ASHE in 2009 as a national centre for processing applications to higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia. The Central Applications Office carries out activities related to the submission and processing of applications to higher education institutions, the most important being effective central applications processing, with the aim of ensuring equal access to all candidates, facilitating the application process and decreasing its costs. The application process is administered via the National Information System for Applications to Higher Education Institutions, the function of which is to enable candidates to apply to desired study programmes. Centralized applications based on the results of the State Matura are currently done only for undergraduate programmes, however ASHE is introducing this possibility also for graduate programmes of Croatian higher education institutions.

ASHE also carries out professional recognition of foreign higher education qualifications for the purpose of enabling access to employment in the Republic of Croatia, and provides information on foreign education systems as well as the national education system (National ENIC/NARIC Office). The National ENIC/NARIC Office serves as an information centre on academic mobility and recognition of foreign higher education qualifications, implementing a number of activities

aimed at supporting the strategic goals of encouraging international mobility in Europe and beyond, and participating in developing quality assurance platforms for all levels of education. In the period 2005-2015, the National ENIC/NARIC Office processed and recognised more than 17 500 foreign higher education qualifications. The quality of work of the Croatian ENIC/NARIC Office is confirmed by numerous invitations it receives to participate in international projects and consultations.

Because ASHE is also legally authorised to collect and analyse data on the systems in its purview, it has a department that administers several information systems which are also used to collect data within evaluation procedures, keeps the list of accredited study programmes in Croatia (the registers are formally administered by the Ministry), and provides data to the public.

Finally, ASHE provides professional and administrative support to the work of strategic and professional bodies within the system of science and higher education:

The National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development is the most prominent professional body concerned with the development and quality of scientific activity and the system of science, higher education and technological development in the Republic of Croatia. The Council was established in 2014 by merging two previous bodies – the National Council for Science and the National Council for Higher Education. ASHE prepares necessary materials and information and drafts minutes, decisions, conclusions and other documents necessary for the Council's sessions.

The Council of Polytechnics and Colleges has 40 members, of which 15 are polytechnics and 25 are colleges. Of the total number of members, 14 are public higher education institutions, while almost twice as many (26) are private higher education institutions. ASHE provides administrative support to the Council's sessions.

From September 2014, ASHE provides professional and administrative support to the **Committee for Ethics in Science and Higher Education**, the most prominent advisory and professional body for the promotion of ethical principles and values in science and higher

education, business, public relations, application of modern technology, and environmental protection.

ASHE also provides administrative support to **seven scientific area councils, 23 field committees for all scientific fields** and areas in Croatia (Office for Scientific Field Committees), in charge of procedures of appointment of scientists and teachers to scientific grades, and **seven field committees** in charge of procedures of appointment of teachers to teaching grades.

5. SWOT ANALYSIS

In 2015, ASHE produced a new strategy and updated its vision and mission statements. New mission statement reads: *ASHE promotes the importance of quality assurance in higher education and science, with the aim of continuous quality improvement of higher education institutions, scientific organisations and the overall Croatian system of science and higher education and its recognisability within the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, while encouraging the society's sustainable development.* The vision of ASHE is to *by actively participating in shaping trends and innovative practice in the field of quality assurance, strive to contribute to positive changes in the European Higher Education Area.* Based on that vision and mission, ASHE identified weaknesses, strengths, threats and opportunities in its environment, which are presented in the table below.

STRENGTHS:

- ASHE is a national agency and a member of the most important European and international quality assurance associations, with which it actively cooperates and exchanges good practice;
- ASHE carried out the first comprehensive evaluation of all higher education institutions and scientific organisations in Croatia, by applying relevant national and international standards;
- The implementation of all procedures within the Agency's scope of work allows data integration and overview of the entire system of science and higher education;
- The Agency is independent in carrying out activities within its area of competence;
- The Agency's scope of work is transparently defined;
- Employees are professional, qualified and oriented toward lifelong learning;
- Renowned international experts participate in panels for external evaluation, and the development of peer review models;
- Stakeholders are actively involved in defining and carrying out

WEAKNESSES:

- There is no integrated information system support to all external evaluation procedures at the Agency level;
- There are partial overlaps in the implementation of external evaluation procedures;
- Stronger emphasis on the input indicators and processes than on outputs in external evaluations;
- The scope of work is focused on the national level, as per the Act on Quality Assurance;
- ASHE is funded mainly from the state budget;
- Lack of a comprehensive analysis of the system of higher education and science;
- Lack of working space;
- There is no integral national database on the system of higher education and science.

<p>the Agency's activities;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Good perception of the Agency in the academic and general public; ○ Promotion and development of quality culture in higher education and science. 	
<p>OPPORTUNITIES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strengthening the awareness of the importance and benefits of quality assurance in higher education and science; ○ Development of Croatian Qualifications Framework and the Register of Qualifications through the evaluation of learning outcomes; ○ Amendments to the legislation and implementation of the adopted National Strategy for Education, Science and Technology; ○ Expanding the role of ASHE to include new activities and the development of new models in external evaluation; ○ The possibility of charging certain services rendered to customers; ○ Carrying out external evaluation abroad; ○ The EU Structural Funds absorption; ○ International projects. 	<p>THREATS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Long-standing unfavourable economic environment in the Republic of Croatia and state budget cuts; ○ Lack of awareness of the need for long-term investment in science and higher education, particularly in times of crisis; ○ Increasingly negative public perception of public services; ○ Potential lack of objectivity in a small national academic community; ○ Insufficient number of employees trained in the field of quality assurance at higher education institutions; ○ Lack of awareness of benefits of quality assurance system in higher education institutions; ○ Incomplete and insufficient information on the higher education and science system.

Since the end of 2015, when this analysis was made, ASHE already started using part of those opportunities by carrying out pilot-evaluations abroad and by relying on EU Structural Funds.

6. HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY

According to the *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Annex 2)*, ASHE is responsible for carrying out the following external quality assurance procedures in higher education: **initial accreditation** and **re-accreditation** of higher education institutions and study programmes, **thematic evaluation**, and **audit** of quality assurance systems at higher education institutions. Accreditation is further regulated by the *Ordinance on the Content of a Licence and Conditions for Issuing a Licence for Performing Higher Education Activity, Carrying out a Study Programme and Re-Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions (Annex 3, hereinafter: the Accreditation Ordinance)*.

According to the *Quality Assurance Act (Annex 2)*, the **initial accreditation** for performing higher education activities is carried out at all **new higher education institutions**, while initial accreditation for delivering a **new study programme** is carried out at all polytechnics and colleges, and private universities (the Procedure is annexed as *Annex 8*, and the criteria are part of the Reporting Template, *Annex 9*). The outcome of initial accreditation is an accreditation recommendation to the Minister for issuance or denial of license to perform higher education activities and/or deliver a new study programme. In the past five years, ASHE carried out initial accreditation of one new college and **32** new study programmes.

Public universities can self-accredit new study programmes, which thus undergo the process of internal evaluation at the university level and are approved by the decision of the university senate. Although new study programmes delivered on public universities are not subject to initial accreditation, the Agency performs an administrative check of compliance with the strategic document *Network of higher education institutions and study programmes in Croatia*. The document, adopted by the Parliament, defines the regional and national priorities for setting up

new public higher education institutions and study programmes, and is meant to prevent the establishment of too many similar programmes in the same geographic area. The Agency then submits its opinion on the **justification of public funding** for said programmes to the Ministry.

Re-accreditation is an evaluation procedure carried out every five years at all public and private higher education institutions in Croatia, in line with the *Accreditation Ordinance (Annex 3)* and *Procedure for Re-accreditation (Annex 5)*. Re-accreditation is performed at the level of higher education institution (university, university department, faculty, academy, polytechnic or college) but can also result in programme-level decisions: an accreditation recommendation is given to the minister for issuance or renewal of a licence for performing higher education activity or a part of activity and delivery of study programmes, issuance of a letter of expectation for a period of up to three years (which can suspend student enrolments for a time), or denial of licence for performing an activity or a part of activity. The first re-accreditation cycle began in 2010 and was completed in the first half of 2016. This is the first time a comprehensive evaluation of the entire system of higher education in Croatia was carried out in accordance with a single methodology and criteria, in compliance with the ESG and examples of good international practice. Based on the re-accreditations carried out, ASHE conducted an analysis of the entire procedure, which was used in the development of an improved re-accreditation model entirely adjusted to the revised ESG and good international practice. An analysis of the higher education system was made, with recommendations for its further improvement, which was primarily intended for decision makers in higher education, i.e. for informed planning of the necessary changes.

Thematic evaluation evaluates a particular aspect of a higher education institution or the system of higher education, and results in a report of the expert panel which is published on ASHE website. It is meant to be a type of study, which can be launched by ASHE or upon a request of the Minister or a higher education institution. It can be done as an administrative, data-collecting exercise, and it can involve peer panels, usually in forming the research questions and drawing conclusions from the results. By way of exception, it can result in the launch of re-accreditation, as per relevant legislation. In the past five years, ASHE carried out three thematic evaluation procedures in higher education: thematic evaluation of the compliance with minimal conditions

within the procedure of approving new study programmes of public universities, thematic evaluation of the compliance of study programmes in biomedicine and healthcare with relevant EU directive, and thematic evaluation of doctoral study programmes, which identified certain issues and served as the basis for launching re-accreditation of all doctoral study programmes in Croatia. The outcome of all three procedures was a public report. While according to the law thematic evaluation can serve as a basis for launching a re-accreditation procedure, this has happened only at the level of the system, and it has never served as a basis of re-accreditation of any single institution or programme.

In 2012 ASHE was tasked by the Minister to perform a thematic evaluation of doctoral programmes, which was a data collection exercise steered by an independent panel of academics. The results of this thematic evaluation, published in a report, indicated a number of issues with the doctoral programmes in Croatia. While problems with the third cycle were also indicated in the reports from the reaccreditation of higher education institutions, institutional reaccreditation looked at quality assurance, minimal and legal conditions primarily at the institutional level. Thus, quality issues at the level of programmes could not be discussed in detail, and decisions on programmes were made only if minimal conditions at the institutional level were not met. The Minister thus requested ASHE to perform programme-level re-accreditation of third cycle programmes. ASHE then asked the panel that was tasked with the thematic evaluation to start drafting the criteria for such a review, which were adopted by the Accreditation Council in 2015 after a public discussion (and are annexed in *Annex 7*). **Re-accreditation of postgraduate (doctoral) university studies** thus follows the same methodology and regulations as re-accreditation in higher education, but has specific quality criteria which combine the ESG with the assessment of the quality of the research performed. This procedure is ongoing, with 20 site visits carried out in June and 3 in September 2016.

The procedure of **external quality assurance audit** is used to evaluate the effectiveness and coherence of established quality assurance systems (QAS) at higher education institutions, and its contribution to the development of internal quality culture. The audit uses the ESG as the basic criteria against which to evaluate the degree of the development of the QAS, defining benchmarks and evidence for each standard. The quality assurance systems at Croatian higher education

institutions were mostly established after the adoption of the *Act on Quality Assurance (Annex 2)*. Although the Act prescribed the audit procedure as mandatory, Accreditation Council decided that the procedure would in the first cycle be implemented at all public universities and polytechnics, and those HEIs that show interest and/or meet the necessary preconditions. The outcome of the procedure, as defined by the *Ordinance on External Audit of Quality Assurance Systems at Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia (Annex 10)* is the public report and a certificate issued by the Agency Accreditation Council if the preconditions are met. If the preconditions are not met, a re-audit, re-accreditation or a thematic review can be launched.

The Agency is EQAR-listed and often received invitations to perform international reviews, however the legal framework does not currently regulate the Agency's cross-border activities. Because of this, the Agency cannot perform reviews abroad which would have legal consequences, but only evaluations, dependent on the decision of the Management Board and the Accreditation Council. So far the Agency has performed one such evaluation – the quality audit of an institution in Slovenia, funded through a Slovenian ministry quality improvement project, for which it charged a fee. The decision to perform such an evaluation was made also because Slovenia is a neighbouring country with a very similar higher education system, and because a number of reviewers in audits in Croatia are Slovenian academics. The Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was duly informed on this. The audit criteria and the procedure were deemed suitable for the requirements of the review and were implemented exactly as they would have been in Croatia. The Agency was invited in 2015 to perform a review of the University of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The University has about a quarter of students that are Croatian citizens, and even more that find employment in Croatia, and it asked to be evaluated against the Croatian institutional re-accreditation criteria and following the same procedure, believing it would make them even more competitive at the Croatian market. The Croatian Ministry, which partly funds the University, supported this request. The Agency has informed the competent agency, the Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance of Bosnia and Herzegovina of the planned procedure, and plans to carry out a site visit in November. In addition to the Croatian re-accreditation criteria, the Agency will also consider the legislative framework and quality criteria used in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Because many

Croatian academics cooperate with academics institutions in that country, very often cooperating precisely with the University of Mostar, to avoid conflicts of interest most of the panel members will be international academics. The outcome of the procedure will be a public report.

Evaluation of study programmes for the registration in Croatian Qualifications Framework

Register is a new procedure of external evaluation of higher education study programmes which is to be carried out by ASHE, in accordance with the *Act on Croatian Qualifications Framework* and the *Regulation on the Croatian Qualifications Framework*. These acts were adopted after the *Quality Assurance Act (Annex 2)*, which thus does not mention this type of evaluation. The *Qualifications Framework Act* does not place all Croatian qualifications in the Framework automatically, but establishes Sectoral Councils who are to adopt Occupational Standards and connected Qualification Standards which define minimal learning outcomes for a group of qualifications, before any single qualification can enter the Framework. Only then institutions can apply with their programmes for inclusion in the Framework, and ASHE is to check if these programmes are aligned with the ESG and if they truly lead to the outcomes listed in the Standard. Such a programme evaluation is thus supposed to be voluntary and serve as an additional ‘quality label’. ASHE is currently developing the methodology and criteria for this evaluation, which will be launched after first qualifications enter the Framework, which is supposed to happen by the beginning of 2017.

Table 3: Evaluation in higher education

Procedure	No. of procedures completed by the end of 2015	No. of reviewers (total)	No. of foreign reviewers
Re-accreditation of higher education institutions	139	619	353
External quality assurance audit	37	185	37
Initial accreditation of higher education institutions	1	3	-
Initial accreditation of study programmes	32	71	3

Source: ASHE, 2016

7. AGENCY'S QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES AND THEIR METHODOLOGIES

As noted, all Agency procedures are regulated by the *Quality Assurance Act (Annex 2)* and Agency regulations, with the accreditation procedures further regulated by the *Accreditation Ordinance (Annex 3)*.

Initial accreditation is carried out in line with the *Procedure for the Initial Accreditation for Performing Higher Education Activity*, that is, *Initial Accreditation for the Implementation of a Study Programme (Annex 8)*. The procedure checks if the new programme or HEI meets the requirements set by the *Accreditation Ordinance (Annex 3)*. When establishing a new HEI, the Agency Accreditation Council first approves the application for founding which includes the founding act, evidence of alignment with the strategic document Network of Higher Education

Institutions, evidence that equipment and space have been secured, and contract with an existing HEI to serve as a mentor institution. This is all checked before approval through a site visit by an independent panel. After at least two years of delivering the programme of the mentoring institution, the new HEI can apply for accreditation if its own study programme(s).

The requirements to set up a new study programme also require alignment with the *Network* document, define the minimal necessary number of teachers and resources, and in addition to the proof of these the institutions need to submit the planned learning outcomes and curricula of the programme as well as evidence on employability of future graduates. The study programme accreditation procedure involves the following steps: submission of the documents, including the self-evaluation, panel visit to the institution, reporting and passing of the accreditation recommendation. The panel is appointed by the Accreditation Council – the panels normally have three members, usually Croatian higher education teachers and a student from the Agency’s database of experts. International panel members are invited when a specific type of expertise is necessary. The institution submits the self-evaluation which includes a detailed description of the new programme (or institution) which refers to questions and topics defined by the Agency (in a public document titled *Instructions for writing a programme proposal*). The institution also submits the data on resources, including teachers, to the Agency via an information system, which calculates if the minimal legally defined numbers have been reached. The first step for the Agency is to perform an administrative check of compliance with the *Network* document, and then it forwards the documentation to the panel. The panel receives a briefing by the Agency coordinator directly before the site visits, which usually lasts for 1 day. The coordinator also participates in the site visit, together with an interpreter if there are international panel members. After the site visit the panel completes the *Report (Annex 9)* following the Agency template; in the Report they assess if the minimal requirements have been met or not, and give the recommendation to accredit the new programme or institution or not. The panel can ask for changes to the programme before passing a decision, and then decide on the basis of the new documents submitted. In practice, this is what usually happened – most programmes were accredited only after changes recommended by the panels have been implemented. The panel submits the Report to the Accreditation Council, who decide on the basis of the administrative checks performed by the Agency, the Report and the institutional reaction to the Report. The Council then passes the opinion to the Minister who passes the accreditation decision. Although

there is no formal follow-up in the initial accreditation, once the licence for a new study programme is issued, the programme is subject to re-accreditation in five-year cycles.

Reaccreditation of higher education institutions is performed in line with the *Accreditation Ordinance (Annex 3)* and *Procedure for Re-accreditation of Higher Education Institutions (Annex 5)*. The procedure checks if the institution meets the minimal conditions to perform higher education activity and its study programmes listed in the Ordinance which refer to the necessary teachers and resources. If the institution is also registered as a scientific organisation (which is obligatory for all universities and their constituents), it also checks the compliance with the minimal conditions listed in the *Ordinance on Conditions for Issuing Licence for Scientific Activity, Conditions for Re-accreditation Scientific Organisations and Content of Licence* which refer to the existence of a multi-annual research plan, access to necessary resources and the number of researchers employed. Finally, the procedure includes a quality assessment according to the *Criteria for the assessment of quality of higher education institutions within universities/ Criteria for the assessment of quality of polytechnics and colleges (Annex 6)*.

The procedure includes the following steps: development of the self-evaluation report, peer panel visit, development of the final report, issuance of the accreditation recommendation, and follow-up. The procedure is launched by a *Re-accreditation Plan* which is adopted by the Accreditation Council for every academic year. There is also a legal possibility to launch the procedure on the request by the Minister even outside the annual plan. After the Plan is adopted (and after any institutional requests to postpone the procedure have been considered), the institutions start with their self-evaluations. They have no less than three months to create a self-evaluation report based on the *Guidelines for drafting self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions within universities/Guidelines for drafting self-evaluation reports of polytechnics and colleges*. To support the institutions, the Agency organises workshops on how to do self-evaluation, and regularly communicates with the institutions, typically using the public forum on the Agency website. The self-evaluations are submitted by the institutions in Croatian and English and forwarded with attachments to the panels at least one month before the site visit. The five-member panel usually consists of foreign and Croatian academics and students, and is appointed by the Accreditation Council. The panel members are suggested by the Agency staff, who find

them through public calls, through the former reviewers' database, recommendations of other agencies and, when a specific type of expertise is necessary, by searching for the right people online. Once the panel is appointed, the institution can complain to the Council. The site visit usually lasts two days- sometimes more if deemed necessary. The Agency organises a briefing for the panel members one day before the site visit. The same panel is usually sent to two similar institutions to provide for comparability and consistency of assessment. The panel is always accompanied by the coordinator from the Agency, and, if necessary, the interpreter. Re-accreditation was typically - and other procedures occasionally - conducted by international panels, which required of HEIs to submit self-evaluations in both Croatian and English, and for study visits to include an official interpreter. ASHE employs five trained interpreters, and when outside interpreters have to be hired they are briefed and sign a conflict-of-interest statement. When possible, former student reviewers and other people with experience in external quality assurance of higher education, are hired as interpreters. Sometimes other agency staff can participate as observers. After the site visit the panel develops the Final Report using the Agency's template and the support of the coordinator; the report has to be completed within a month. In the report, each criterion is assessed on a five-point scale (from 'Not Implemented' to 'Fully Implemented') with recommendations, and the panel also identifies institutional advantages, disadvantages and examples of good practice. When the Report is completed, it is translated by the Agency staff and sent to the institution for comments. The Accreditation Council considers the report together with the institutional comments and the analysis of the quantitative data from the Agency's information system, and then passes the final decision and issues the recommendation to the Minister. The follow up depends on the final recommendation. higher education institutions that received a letter of expectation (approx. one third of the institutions) are expected to take corrective actions and remedy deficiencies identified by the expert panel within a specified period of time (up to three years), and submit the report thereof. This report, substantiated with appropriate evidence, is then reviewed by the Accreditation Council, which may, if necessary, request the opinion of the expert panel. Part of the expert panel will in this case review the documentation, re-visit the institution and report on the improvements identified. Another form of follow-up is related to the positive re-accreditation outcome: the confirmation on compliance with conditions for continued activity, i.e. licence extension. In this case, the institution is required to submit its action plan within six months, as well as to annually

report on its implementation. Special forms are provided to institutions for both the action plan and annual report.

The **re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes** is performed in line with the same procedural document, however there are some differences when compared to the institutional re-accreditation. Because it is a programme-level review, the Agency, supported by an independent panel of academics and a working group consisting of vice-rectors for science of Croatian universities, combined the ESG and the criteria for assessing the research quality in a single set of criteria specific for doctoral programme evaluations (*Annex 7*), adopted by the Accreditation Council after a public discussion. Because there are a number of programmes in each field, the Agency decided to review them in clusters, with one large panel in charge of all programmes in similar fields, and sub-panels carrying out site-visits and submitting programme-level reports. This was done to provide for comparability between programmes and better sector-specific recommendations. The assessment scale was changed, so that the panel is able to say if the criteria are met or not, and note if they consider something to be of exceptional quality. Instead of the Accreditation Council making the accreditation recommendation on the basis of the report and quantitative data, the quantitative data is part of the report and the panel is asked to suggest the decision to the Council. Instead of directing the contents of the self-evaluation in detail, the Agency decided to allow more autonomy to institutions in deciding what to write and present, and thus organised separate meetings at each institution to see how it can adapt the rather general self-evaluation guidelines to its own practices. The new re-accreditation model will include these changes if they are shown to be effective in the first round of re-accrediting doctoral programmes in June and September 2016. As a programme-level review, it will also serve as a model for future evaluations of programmes for the Croatian Qualifications Framework.

Thematic evaluations do not have a legally defined procedure, but are meant to be rather flexible, enabling the Agency to create a tailor-made procedure which would best meet the specific needs for collecting information and providing conclusions and recommendations. The procedures implemented so far all started with the appointment of an independent panel who then worked with the Agency in forming the survey questions, analysing the results and producing the reports. While the site visits were never a part of the procedure, typically meetings with the

institutions involved were organised. The outcome was always a public report adopted by the Accreditation Council in the form of a summary of the data collected and system-wide recommendations. Considering that thematic evaluations do not produce outcomes at the level of institutions or programmes, and that submitted data is published, additional checks and follow-ups were not deemed necessary. Legally, thematic evaluation can also result in a decision to initiate re-accreditation, which has hitherto been the case in the thematic evaluation of research institutes and doctoral studies. In both cases, re-accreditation was initiated at a system-wide level, not just for individual institutions.

The **audit** procedure is performed in line with the *Ordinance on External Audit of Quality Assurance Systems at Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia (Annex 10)*, and organised according to the annual plan. The equivalent document to self-evaluation is HEI's internal audit report. The peer panels usually have 5 members – 2 academics (one of which is foreign) and an industry, student and Agency representative. To become a panel member, one has to undergo regular trainings, and the whole panel is briefed before the site visit. The criteria follow the ESGs to assess the internal QAS of HEIs. The first report is drafted after the site-visit and submitted to the institution, after which there is a six-month follow-up period. Upon its completion, HEI submits its follow-up report on the activities that have been carried out, as per expert panel's recommendations. Based on this information, the expert panel makes a final report, including a final assessment of the level of development and efficiency of HEI's quality assurance system, as well as recommendations for the following period. If HEI's QAS meets ASHE criteria for certification, a certificate is awarded to the institution, valid for a period of five years. Otherwise, the audit procedure can be repeated (re-audit), in accordance with the plan adopted by the Accreditation Council, or a thematic evaluation or a re-accreditation procedure can be initiated for that institution. The first audit cycle began in 2010 and will be completed during 2016. The analysis of the first audit cycle was used for the development of a new model of audit.

8. AGENCY'S INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ASHE has established an integrated quality assurance system aligned with the ESG and requirements of ISO 9001, which in practice means the application of the Deming Cycle (the so-called PDCA - Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle). In compliance with the amendments to the ESG as well as the ISO standard made in 2015, ASHE's Quality Policy was amended. The Quality Policy represents a framework for quality assurance in all processes carried out by ASHE. It is based on the national legal framework, the Ethical Codices of the Accreditation Council and the Committee for Ethics in Science and Higher Education, the ESGs, the ISO 9001 standard, and the values of participation, transparency, accountability, aiming at implementing best international practices and developing human potential and a quality culture. *Quality Assurance Manual* was also revised and risk management procedure introduced in the quality assurance system. In applying its quality policy, ASHE relies on its mission, vision and values, while the quality assurance system provides the basis for the improvement of business processes by the management and all employees.

All ASHE employees have been involved in the development of the new *ASHE Strategy 2016–2020*. The *Strategy* incorporates the values upheld by ASHE in its work, such as credibility, professionalism, responsibility, flexibility, cooperation and openness. In line with the *Strategy*, ASHE's Management Board adopts an annual operational plan at the beginning of each year, while a report on the implementation of operational plans is adopted at the end of each year. Confidentiality, ethical behaviour and professionalism of ASHE employees are further ensured by the application of the *Labour Act*, *Employment Contract* signed between ASHE and each employee, *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement* signed by each employee, the *Code of Ethics of ASHE Employees* and the *Code of Conduct of the Accreditation Council*. With respect to the Agency's bodies (the Accreditation Council and the Management Board) and expert panels in the procedures of external evaluation, these principles are defined by the *Quality Assurance Act (Annex 2)*, ASHE's *Statute (Annex 4)*, *Rules of Procedure of the Management Board*, *Rules of Procedure of the Accreditation Council* and the regulations governing external evaluation procedures (criteria for the election of international panel members). Members of the

Agency's bodies and expert panels sign a *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement*. In addition to the said documents, there is also the *Code of Ethics* adopted by the Committee for Ethics in Science and Higher Education, which applies to the system of science and higher education in the Republic of Croatia. *Public Procurement Act* and other regulations regulate the procurement of goods and services. ASHE does not subcontract tasks related to external quality assurance. As noted, ASHE participates in a number of enhancement-led projects in cooperation with Croatian HEIs, as is its mission. All project proposals, as well as invitations to ASHE staff to personally participate in various forms of cooperation, are subject to approval by the ASHE Management and International Cooperation Department who make sure that the participation is nationally relevant and has no possibility of leading to conflicts of interest.

The quality assurance system in general is subject to internal audit carried out once a year by trained ASHE employees. The resulting document *Management Assessment* contains, among other, the assessment of the quality of improvements made following internal audit, results and conclusions obtained based on the analysis of customer satisfaction surveys, the analysis of the staff satisfaction survey and the information regarding the implementation of the adopted annual operational plan. Staff satisfaction survey was enhanced in 2015 when the Agency participated in the activities of ENQA's Staff Development Group, aimed at the improvement of human resources development. The *Management Assessment* has been made available to all employees and it is the starting point for the next improvement cycle. ASHE regularly undergoes external review in compliance with ISO 9001. The Agency's quality has also been acknowledged by the Croatian Society for Quality, which awarded the *Charter for Special Contribution in Education and Promotion of Quality* to the Agency in 2014.

In addition to the regular annual customer satisfaction surveys, ASHE pays special attention to the external quality assurance procedure it conducts. ASHE gathers feedback from members of expert panels and evaluated higher education institutions by means of surveys, by e-mail, on forums, seminars, workshops, round tables, conferences, and by participating in projects and discussions about important topics at meetings of various bodies, such as the Ministry, Croatian Rectors' Conference, Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, Croatian Students' Union and the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development. Following external evaluation, ASHE conducts surveys via anonymous questionnaires sent to higher

education institutions or scientific organisations and members of expert panels (Croatian and international members, students and representatives of the business sector). The obtained feedback is analysed and a quality index calculated based on the results, while trends are annually monitored and discussed at the department level and at the level of the entire institution, the Management Board and the Accreditation Council. ASHE coordinators in external evaluation procedures gather feedback from evaluated institutions and members of expert panels. Coordinators also regularly hold meetings attended by heads of departments and assistant directors, in which they discuss feedback on evaluation procedures. This feedback is presented at the Accreditation Council sessions. The Accreditation Council also obtains feedback by inviting members of the management of evaluated higher education institutions to express their satisfaction with the procedures carried out, and the impact of external evaluation on their institution's advancement. The Accreditation Council adopts the annual report in which it reflects on the fulfilment of the planned activities. Accreditation Council members fill out an anonymous survey once a year, in which they evaluate their cooperation with other ASHE bodies and share their experience, make suggestions for improvement or commend the work of the Agency.

At the end of the first cycle of external evaluation, ASHE conducted a survey on the impact of external evaluation on the higher education system in Croatia in 2015. The purpose of the survey was to examine the fitness-for-purpose of re-accreditation and audit, and to find out what the concept of quality means to stakeholders in Croatian system of higher education. The answers were mostly positive, which is a good indication that ASHE fulfilled the planned activities and, having taken into account previous recommendations, improved the process of evaluation and the quality of services it rendered. In addition to the systematic gathering of information, we are especially pleased to receive unsolicited praise after the evaluation procedures, by e-mail, telephone or in a direct contact. The stakeholders most often emphasize professionalism of ASHE employees, efficiency, pleasant cooperation, accuracy and very good organisation. This is also evident in the fact that many members of expert committees expressed a desire to participate in the evaluation procedures carried out by ASHE again.

9. AGENCY'S INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

ASHE is dedicated to participating in the international quality assurance system in higher education and science as an established and active member. This is primarily reflected in and made easier by the fact that ASHE regularly invites international peers to participate in its procedures and publishes its external quality assurance reports, newsletter, website and annual report both in Croatian and English. By being active abroad and encouraging dialogue and exchange of good practice with peers from Europe, Asia and the United States of America, and due to the Agency's ever strengthening international recognition, ASHE actively contributes to the development of Croatian science and higher education. The international activities of the Agency are aimed at networking, exchanging experiences, developing procedures, improving activities and contributing to the recognisability of Croatian science and higher education abroad.

In addition to ENQA and EQAR, ASHE is member of several other international associations. ASHE's quality was acknowledged by the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, an international association of institutions interested in the topic of academic ranking and excellence in higher education and science, which accepted ASHE as its full member. ASHE is also a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), CHEA International Quality Group, European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), observer in the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Institutional Management in Higher Education Forum (OECD IMHE). ASHE has actively participated in activities of all these networks, organising both ENQA and ECA events, readily accepting an invitation to cooperate in a now completed ENQA-led project on improving quality assurance reports, ECA-launched projects on evaluating internationalisation and, currently, on evaluating learning outcomes, and, finally, a CEENQA-led project on alignment with qualifications frameworks. ASHE staff are also active members of several ENQA and ECA working groups, and have participated in staff exchange organised by APQN and ECA. International connections are also helpful in finding international peers to participate in ASHE procedures – ASHE regularly recommends reviewers it has trained to other agencies, and asks other agencies to do the same when it has specific requests. To give a recent example, for an initial accreditation of a blended programme ASHE

has requested and received recommendations for peers experienced in evaluating online programmes.

As an outcome of its participation in international networks and projects, ASHE employees presented the Agency's activities in the United States of America, Asia, Africa and many European countries, as well as Croatian examples of good practice in the field of quality assurance as guest lecturers at the following conferences, to name a few: CHEA Annual Conference, 2013 and 2016, Washington, DC, USA; Regional Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Arab States Region, Cairo, Egypt, 2015; World Bank Workshop on External Quality Assurance, Ankara, Turkey, 2015; workshops at Berkeley Institute of Higher Education, 2013, Penn State, 2016 and University of Georgia, USA, 2016; Omsk University, Russia, 2015; Euro-Asia Economic Forum, Xi'an, China, 2014; 6th International GUIDE Conference, Athens, Greece, 2013; Private Higher Education Forum, Moscow, Russia, 2012; Forum on Quality Assurance, Budapest, Hungary, 2010; 6th Annual Conference of Experts in Higher Education, Moscow, Russia, 2011; Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TAEA) and 5 Taiwanese universities, as a part of APQN Exchange Programme, 2012; 14th National Seminar of Higher Education Institutions, Masaryk University, Telč, Czech Republic, 2012; 6th Annual HEIR Conference, Birmingham, UK, 2013; 7th Annual HEIR Conference, Oxford, UK, 2014.

ASHE also had the opportunity to receive a number of international experts in the field of quality assurance, renowned university professors and scientists, such as Professor Dan Shechtman, who won the 2011 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, dr. Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and Mrs. Stamenka Uvalić Trumbić, Chief of the Higher Education Section at UNESCO.

ASHE also actively participates in the activities of the European and global networks for mobility and recognition of foreign higher education qualifications (ENIC-NARIC Network) ASHE has been actively involved in the activities of the International Association of Admissions Organisations – IAAO; last conference of that association was held in Croatia in 2016, and was hosted by ASHE.

10. COMPLIANCE WITH THE EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (ESG)

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

All ASHE activities are carried out in line with the *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Annex 2)*, which stipulates that *the Agency shall be autonomous and independent, respecting European standards and guidelines (ESG), as well as international practice in the field of quality assurance in science and higher education (Article 4)*. As already stated, ASHE mission is to *promote the importance of quality assurance in higher education and science, with the aim of continuous quality improvement of higher education institutions, scientific organisations and the overall Croatian system of science and higher education and its recognisability within the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, while encouraging the society's sustainable development*. ASHE vision statement reads as follows: *By actively participating in shaping trends and innovative practice in the field of quality assurance, ASHE will strive to contribute to positive changes in the European Higher Education Area*. Mission statement is an integral part of the *Strategy 2016-2020*, which also includes annual operational plans.

An essential part of fulfilling the mission is a regular implementation of external evaluation procedures compliant with ESG, Part II, as detailed in subsequent chapters (2.1-2.7). These processes are conducted regularly and in accordance with the pre-defined, published annual plans - of which institutions are informed well in advance to allow for adjustments - as well as related operational and financial plans. Different Agency procedures differ in their objectives, as defined by the *Quality Assurance Act (Annex 2)* and Agency regulations. The thematic evaluation is not a full review, but a data collecting exercise meant to provide information on some aspect of the higher education system or institution. Audit is primarily aimed at improving and recognising the quality of the institutional internal quality assurance system. The accreditation and reaccreditation procedures look at compliance with the minimal standards as defined by the

Accreditation Ordinance (Annex 3) and pass a quality assessment of institutions and study programmes.

In addition to these, ASHE fulfils its mission through numerous other activities - evaluations in science, recognition of foreign higher education qualifications, enrolments to higher education institutions, and support to national bodies in higher education and science, including the administrative support to appointments to teaching and scientific grades.

Evaluation of scientific research, to the extent research is carried out at higher education institutions, is embedded in procedures of re-accreditation and audit, and is not conducted as a separate procedure. Evaluation of scientific organisations that are not higher education institutions follows some ESG standards and guidelines, and is effectively similar to initial accreditation, re-accreditation and audit procedures as described herein. At the request of competent authorities, ASHE also conducts other evaluations in science, which are not related to evaluations in higher education, making use of the data collected. External quality assurance procedures also benefit from other ASHE activities: ENIC/NARIC Office provides information on different systems of higher education, including, for example, information on whether the partner HEIs are accredited; CAO maintains data on enrolled students; ASHE Dept. of Analytics and Statistics collects and compiles data from various sources, such as the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, and is also responsible for compiling accreditation decisions for public universities, and registering newly accredited study programmes in the Directory of accredited study programmes in the Republic of Croatia, including their translation to English. The English version of the Directory is also available on the *Study in Croatia* and *Qrossroads* websites. HEIs which are required to submit various data, are also provided with support from ASHE in this regard; in addition to integrating data at the level of the Agency, ASHE is actively involved in the development of the national higher education database.

ASHE bodies comprise representatives of all stakeholders in higher education and science, including students. In order to secure transparency and public confidence, ASHE Accreditation Council also includes a representative of civil society organisation from the area of higher education and science. The Accreditation Council did not include any foreign members so far, on

account of the language barrier, but also because of frequent and lengthy Council sessions. There are, however, plans for further internationalisation in this respect, i.e. the establishment of a separate advisory body that would comprise international experts. The international dimension has been provided by the membership of Croatian academics permanently employed abroad, and by participation of foreigners in peer panels.

ESG 3.2 Official status

The Agency for Science and Higher Education was established by the Croatian Government *Decree* in 2005 (Official Gazette 101/04, 08/07), and its role as the only national body in charge of carrying out external evaluation of quality assurance procedures in science and higher education was re-defined in the *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education* (*Annex 2*). In the initial accreditation and re-accreditation procedures, the Agency adopts an accreditation recommendation based on the opinion of its expert body, the Accreditation Council, upon which the Ministry issues a final decision. In audit, the final decision rests with the ASHE Accreditation Council.

As an EQAR-registered agency, ASHE has on occasions been invited to carry out procedures of external evaluation abroad. Until now, ASHE conducted only one such (pilot) procedure: external quality assurance audit of the International School for Social and Business Studies in Celje, Slovenia. The other procedure, evaluation of the University of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is currently underway. The experience gained from the implementation of these procedures will be used to improve the legislation framework regulating ASHE's evaluations abroad.

ESG 3.3 Independence

The Agency's organisational independence was defined in the *Act on Quality Assurance* (*Annex 2*), Article 3, Paragraph 1 *The Agency shall have the status of an independent legal person with public authorities entered to the judicial records*; and Article 4 Paragraph 1 *In carrying out the*

activities determined by this Act and other regulations, the Agency shall be autonomous and independent, respecting European standards and guidelines as well as international practice in the field of quality assurance in science and higher education.

Operational independence is reflected in the following:

- The Management Board, at the proposal of stakeholders, is appointed by the Parliament, not the Government or the Ministry, thus avoiding influence of the party in power;
- The Management Board appoints the Accreditation Council at the proposal of the Director, based on proposals from stakeholders;
- When appointing members of the Accreditation Council, the balance of interests and representation of all stakeholders is observed, thus avoiding too much influence of a single higher education institution;
- Students are full members of both bodies, and the Accreditation Council has as associate members one representative of the business sector, and one representative of civil society – stakeholders in science and higher education;
- The Agency, i.e. the Accreditation Council, independently decides on the plan and the implementation of evaluation, procedures, criteria, members of expert panels and outcomes of evaluation procedures and other issues related to evaluation;
- The Accreditation Council appoints expert panels, and a higher education institution may raise a concern regarding a conflict of interest and object to the composition of the expert panel;
- All members of the Accreditation Council, as well as all members of expert panels, sign *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement* and an agreement which expressly states that they do not represent third parties, including their institutions, in their work for the Agency: they are, therefore, excluded from any discussion and decision making on matters where there is a conflict of interest involved.

Operational independence is ensured by the independence of the Agency's bodies, as well as by the independence of expert panel members. Expert panels, as mentioned above, regularly include

foreign experts, which prevents potential influence of various interest groups within a small Croatian academic community. Members of expert panels produce an independent final report and pass a quality grade, but can also submit a separate evaluation report.

The final decision rests with the Accreditation Council, based on the submitted expert panel report, the established indicators for minimum requirements and the official statement by the evaluated institution. The Accreditation Council also has the right to request additional statements from members of expert panels, coordinators or representatives of higher education institutions, and invite them to a Council session if further clarification is needed. All decisions are passed by the Accreditation Council by a two-third majority. The Council does not vote for licence denial. In the procedures in which a final decision is issued by the Ministry, the Accreditation Council - albeit it cannot influence the content of the Ministry's decision - additionally checks its legal foundation.

The Agency's independence is also secured by funding from the state budget combined with the EU funds, in order to maintain financial stability. The Agency does not rely on fees from higher education institutions, and - for the time being - does not charge them for the implementation of evaluation procedures. ASHE did, however, charge the fee for the pilot audit of the International School for Social and Business Studies in Slovenia, carried out in 2015 upon request of the institution.

The Agency is not involved in any commercial activities and does not provide any commercial consultancy services to higher education institutions. However, as noted, in order to fulfil its mission, the Agency participates in a number of projects aimed at the development and improvement of higher education institutions, and appoints its employees to various bodies at the national level and at the level of higher education institutions. The scope of these activities has increased since 2015 with the absorption of EU Structural Funds, directed to the alignment of higher education qualifications with the CroQF. This provided funding for a number of workshops, round tables and meetings aimed at the advancement of higher education institutions. In doing so, ASHE pays particular attention to providing advisory and other services to all higher education institutions equally, and almost invariably accepts all invitations for participation in various activities and projects at national and other levels, which contribute to the fulfilment of its mission. In terms of remuneration, the most ASHE benefits from such projects is having the

costs covered, but this is not a precondition for ASHE's participation. Conflicts of interest are avoided primarily by ensuring that evaluation is carried out by independent external panels, with each reviewer signing a *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement*. ASHE is also careful to avoid having employees that are involved in projects with certain higher education institutions work as coordinators in the evaluation of those institutions, in order to avoid potential conflict of interest.

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

The Agency has a special research office that conducts annual analyses and publishes conclusions of conducted evaluation procedures. As re-accreditation procedures were carried out by scientific fields, annual syntheses summarized the situation in each field, and were used as the basis for the following:

- The improvement of the Agency's criteria and changes in procedures, contents of reviewers' training and visit schedules;
- The launch of thematic evaluations, such as the thematic evaluation of postgraduate doctoral studies;
- Initiating amendments of laws and regulations;
- Analysis of the system of higher education, providing a better insight into its strengths and weaknesses upon which decision makers can introduce well-founded decisions and necessary strategic changes in the system of science and higher education.

Based on the five-year re-accreditation of higher education institutions, the Agency made an analysis of the Croatian higher education system, combining data (by individual scientific fields) from HEIs' self-evaluation documents and the main recommendations for improvement produced by expert panels. The analysis is an important contribution to better understanding of the current situation in Croatian higher education and help in the planning of future changes.

ASHE regularly publishes meta-evaluation reports of audits carried out throughout the past year on its website. The meta-evaluation reports provide an analysis of the relevance of the applied methodology, procedural consistency, the quality of training of evaluated higher education institutions and expert panel members, achievements, results and outcomes of the procedures, feedback from the evaluated higher education institutions and expert panel members. It also looks into strengths and weaknesses of higher education institutions, their ability to develop a system that is fit for purpose, as well as their quality assurance.

ASHE also compares data and information collected in external evaluation procedures with the data and information from other sources, in order to provide insight into certain aspects of Croatian system of higher education. These findings are presented at conferences and published on ASHE website in the form of analyses. In collaboration with experts from the academic community, analyses of admission to higher education institutions and student satisfaction were published, with results used to improve ASHE procedures and as a basis of proposals for system advancement that ASHE is making in public debates. Efforts are also being made to ensure public access to all collected data and information, in order to allow interested stakeholders to make further analyses. The importance of ASHE's activities for the system is reflected in the fact that ASHE representatives are appointed to a number of strategic bodies and committees in higher education, which ensures that the conclusions arising out of ASHE processes are being used in policy making.

ESG 3.5 Resources

ASHE annual budget is a part of the state budget allocated to the Ministry. State budget is adopted by the Parliament upon the Government proposal. The Agency independently proposes its budget on the basis of the last year's budget and in accordance with the annual guidelines for drawing up the state budget published by the Ministry of Finance. Since 2011, the budget has been planned on a three-year basis, and the current budget period ends in 2018. After the budget has been approved by the Ministry of Finance, the Agency adopts a decision on the financing of its activities. Over the last five years (2011–2015), the Agency's budget did not vary significantly (up to 10% year-on-year). This manner of funding ensures that the Agency is independent of the

higher education institutions and that its revenues do not depend on the number of external quality assurance procedures it carries out. The negative sides of this form of funding are that delays can happen in allocating funds, and that all funds not spent at the end of the fiscal year have to be returned to the state budget, leading to potential temporary issues with the availability of funds.

The Agency is also partially funded from the Structural Funds and the European Union programmes, which leaves room for cooperation with partners from Europe, innovation as well as cooperation, consideration of and experimental implementation of various processes that the Agency would not be able to perform from its own budget. Relying on two separate budgets instead of one represents an additional source of stability – project funding is not subject to the same deadlines and procedures as the budget funding, and the Agency can rely on it whenever issues with the budget funding arise. The Agency’s Statute allows for a possibility of generating own revenues, but it has not yet been exercised.

The Agency invests a lot of resources in informing the public and stakeholders. This is evident in the content of the Agency’s website and a number of published press releases, articles, printed publications etc. Excellent response and feedback from stakeholders has identified the need to continue printing publications.

Regarding the IT infrastructure, ASHE employs a range of information tools and systems for data collecting and processing. Some of these information tools are national information system, and some are owned and maintained by ASHE. While the national information systems function well, ASHE has identified the need to collect all the information they contain and is working towards integrating them into one centralized, proprietary system. Special attention is paid to security and reliability of the IT infrastructure, using new technology and following the latest market trends in order to preserve integrity, availability and confidentiality of information.

The most important investments made by the Agency are those in human resources. As already mentioned under ESG 2.4, the Agency spends a lot of resources on international expert panels; in addition to fees, ASHE also covers their travelling and accommodation costs. This is done in order to ensure that only the best experts from Europe and beyond participate in the procedures.

The Agency has 73 employees, most of them (62) holding a university degree (five employees hold a PhD degree and six hold an MSc degree). There are 20 employees working on quality assurance in science and higher education, by following and applying the latest trends in quality assurance and undergoing appropriate professional training. They successfully organise and carry out procedures of external evaluation and thus meet the requirement of continuous quality improvement in science and higher education. ASHE employees have also participated in ENQA activities regarding the development of the competence framework for agency employees, which should become the basis for further professional development of the Agency's employees.

ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

As discussed in detail in Chapter 8, ASHE's system of internal quality assurance is based on the legal framework regulating ethical conduct in the academic community and professional conduct and integrity of employees in the public sector, as well as the ESG and the ISO 9001 standard. It is based on the Quality Policy and connected documents, and involves regular collection of feedback from all ASHE staff, everyone involved in external quality assurance procedures, and all stakeholders. Methods of collecting feedback are direct – through surveys, written correspondence and meetings, and indirect – through analysis of press clippings and regular cooperation with the academic community in various bodies, workshops and enhancement-oriented projects.

The feedback overall has been very positive and the improvements introduced through the system have been incremental. Internally, the major issue was information-sharing within ASHE, which led the management to introduce more frequent internal meetings and workshop, and to launch the development of an internal IT system to combine the number of existing systems into a single one. ASHE also changed the rules on usage of the EQAR and ENQA logo on its documents following the correspondence with EQAR and the publication of the Use and Interpretation of the ESGs.

External quality assurance procedures are regulated by the legal framework, which means that they are subject to public discussions and cannot be one-sidedly changed by ASHE. They have

also received overwhelmingly positive feedback, as discussed in detail in Chapters 12 and 14. However, ASHE has it within its purview to change the details of the quality criteria, some of which had their wording changed, some were merged and some separated, to accommodate peers' and HEI's comments on criteria applicability and ease of understanding.

The ASHE Quality Policy does not cover the requirement of this standard that the policy should allow the agency to establish the status and recognition of higher education institutions with which it conducts external quality assurance procedures. Croatian laws clearly define ASHE's status in relation to relevant competent authorities, and the status of institutions subject to accreditation carried out by ASHE. As of yet, ASHE does not carry out evaluations which would change the legal status of higher education institutions abroad. For establishing the legal status of a higher education institution with which it collaborates, ASHE can consult ENIC/NARIC network through its ENIC/NARIC Office. Amendments to the Quality Assurance Act are planned for the end of this year, which will include provisions on cross-border activities.

ESG 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies

ASHE underwent the first international review of compliance with ESG in 2011. In accordance with the recommendations contained in the External Review Report, ASHE further improved its processes during the follow-up stage and reported on it to ENQA and EQAR, which accepted the reports. In line with its obligation to undergo cyclical external review, ASHE initiated a new process of external review conducted by ENQA in 2015, for the purpose of securing full membership in ENQA and registration into EQAR.

Evaluation of the internal quality assurance system based on compliance with ISO 9001 and ESG has been carried out by DNV GL since 2006. Re-certification is carried out once in three years.

ASHE performs self-evaluation every year, in accordance with the internal audit plan. The self-evaluation results in the Management Assessment report, which is used as the basis for the external review carried out by DNV GL. External review results in a report containing

performance indicators and identified areas for improvement. In accordance with the proposals for improvement, ASHE carries out improvements substantiated by underlying evidence by the following external review at the latest.

ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

The table below shows correlation between individual ESG standards and ASHE procedures criteria.

Table 4: ESG standards and corresponding criteria in individual ASHE procedures

ESG standard (Part I)	Checked criteria			
	Audit*	Re-accreditation**	Re-accreditation of doctoral studies***	Initial Accreditation*
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	1.1.	1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 1.6., 1.7, 1.8.	2.1, 2.5.	2.2, 2.3, 2.6, 3.15.
1.2. Design and approval of programmes	1.2.	1.4, 2.1, 2.4, 2.6, 2.10.	2.2, 4.1 – 4.6.	1.2, 1.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.7, 4.1.3.
1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	1.3.	1.6, 2.8, 3.4, 3.7, 3.8.	3.4, 4.7.	2.4, 2.8, 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3.
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	1.2, 1.3, 1.5.	2.2, 2.3., 3.1, 6.1.	2.6, 2.7, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 4.8.	3.8, 3.10, 4.2, 4.6.
1.5. Teaching staff	1.4.	2.8, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.6, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5,	1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 4.8.	2.9, 5.7, 5.8.

		5.6, 5.7		
1.6. Learning resources and student support	1.5.	3.3, 7.1 – 7.6.	1.6, 3.9, 3.10	2.10, 5.1. – 5.6, 5.11
1.7. Information management	1.6.	1.5.	No specific criterion, but submission of data is required.	2.6.
1.8. Public information	1.7.	3.6.	2.7.	2.3, 2.8, 3.16, 3.20.
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	1.2.	1.5, 1.6, 2.1, 2.5, 2.7, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7, 3.8, 7.1, 7.5.	2.3.	2.7, 5.10.
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	The existing legal framework requires for all Croatian higher education institutions to undergo ASHE external evaluation once every five years.			

** Criteria for assessing the level of development and efficiency of QA systems at higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia*

*** Criteria for the assessment of quality of higher education institutions within universities /Criteria for the assessment of quality of polytechnics and colleges (Annex 6)*

****Re-accreditation of Postgraduate University Study Programmes in Croatia: Principles and Criteria (Annex 7)*

***** Guidelines for Writing Study Programme Proposal*

Source: ASHE, 2016

In the **re-accreditation** of higher education institutions that was carried out in the first five-year cycle, the effectiveness of HEIs internal quality assurance systems was assessed against criteria that were - as the procedure itself - closely following ESG, Part I (2005). The existing re-accreditation model is also largely in line with the new, revised standards and guidelines (2015), with additional adjustments being made in the development of a new re-accreditation model for the next evaluation cycle.

Considering that this was the first time all Croatian HEIs were externally evaluated, and that the evaluations were carried out a couple of years after the institutions implemented the Bologna principles (i.e. 3+2+3 model and ECTS credit system) in their study programmes in 2005, a strong emphasis was placed on standards relating to design and approval of new study programmes (ESG 1.2), and continuous monitoring and reviews of programmes (ESG 1.9.): e.g. compliance with the strategy, involvement of students and other stakeholders, learning outcomes, ECTS, student practice, keeping the programmes up-to-date, student assessment, student satisfaction, student support in achieving the intended learning outcomes, collecting data on student admission, progression, graduation and employment, analyses aimed at improving the quality of study programmes, etc. All these elements were evaluated through documentation review (review of self-evaluation reports, syllabi, diploma supplements, analyses of student surveys, strategic documents), but also through site-visits, and interviews conducted with HEI administration, heads of study programmes, teachers, students and other stakeholders. Considering that the CroQF contains only generic level descriptors (qualification standards; specific learning outcomes descriptors are still being developed), next re-accreditation cycle will evaluate whether learning outcomes are defined in accordance with these generic descriptors. Further development of CroQF should allow for assessing the intended learning outcomes with regard to specific qualifications descriptors.

The evaluation of postgraduate doctoral studies, currently under way, already assesses whether the intended learning outcomes of study programmes are in line with generic level descriptors, as well as whether they include the necessary transferable skills, if they are made in accordance with good international practice, and whether the available resources and organisation of study are

such as to allow for their achievement. Expert panels also review a sample of doctoral theses in order to evaluate said learning outcomes.

Considering that this was the first re-accreditation cycle, and given the fact that the network of higher education institutions significantly expanded over the last ten years, much emphasis was placed on the conditions in which study programmes were delivered - i.e. ESG 1.5 and 1.6. (competent teaching staff, human resource development, the use of innovative teaching methods, material and human resources for learning). The re-accreditation of higher education institutions also evaluated their scientific/research activities, with a range of criteria related to that segment. The transparency of recruitment was evaluated to a certain extent, as there were some limitations due to a specific system of employment of teachers in Croatia. Namely, new employment and wages budget for the public higher education institutions are approved by the Ministry, and for the last couple of years a ban was in force on any new recruitment in the public sector, except in cases of retirement. These elements were assessed through a documentation review (self-evaluation report, information on teaching/administrative staff, information on scientific productivity/projects), discussions with administration, teachers and students, by attending sample lectures and a tour of the institution (classrooms, laboratories, libraries, student services, practice sites, etc.). In the re-accreditation of doctoral studies, the focus is primarily on scientific resources and their availability to doctoral students, as well as the administrative support provided.

Bearing in mind that internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions - ESG 1.1. - are still mostly in the initial stage of development, an effort was made through re-accreditation procedure to encourage further improvements. By reviewing documentation (self-evaluation report, strategy, student survey analysis, analysis of the quality of teaching and research, examples of specific improvements, minutes from meetings regarding quality assurance, code of ethics etc.), discussions with various stakeholders (administration, internal quality assurance officers, students and other stakeholders), re-accreditation procedure assessed whether the system is established and functional. It evaluated whether the higher education institution collects and analyses data on all its activities, whether this data is used to improve the overall quality (ESG 1.7.), and whether it publishes the information on all its activities (ESG 1.8.). These elements were checked by reviewing data, analyses, website content, etc.

ESG 1.3., related to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, was to a certain extent already implemented in the first re-accreditation cycle, as the site-visits included interviews with teachers, professional staff (student services, office for mobility and international cooperation, student counselling, etc.) and students. Student comments were also collected through confidential e-mail communication on ASHE website, as well as by attending sample lectures. ASHE participated in the *E-Quality* project, aimed at interlinking social inclusion and quality in higher education.

With regard to ESG 1.4., student admission, progression, recognition and certification, the standard was mostly implemented in the first re-accreditation cycle, as HEIs were obliged to provide information in their self-evaluation reports on the structure of the enrolled students, their passing rate, academic performance, drop-out rate and employability of graduates. Review of diplomas and diploma supplements was also included in the evaluation, in order to check whether the documents contain all the necessary elements, such as information identifying the obtained qualification, level of qualification, learning outcomes, ECTS credits, mode of study, etc.

Although the revised ESG were largely implemented in the first re-accreditation cycle, the new re-accreditation model will - in addition to input parameters – put additional emphasis on output parameters, as well as on elements such as intended learning outcomes, with regard to CroQF (ESG 1.2), adjustment to different modes of programme delivery, diversity of students and student assessment (ESG 1.3), recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning, hitherto not evaluated (ESG 1.4), support to diverse student population, with regard to the needs of non-traditional students (ESG 1.6), and further development of information system for collecting higher education data, in order to facilitate this task for HEIs (ESG 1.7).

In the **initial accreditation**, a procedure to which all new higher education institutions and new study programmes are subject, special attention is paid to the quality of the proposed programme - ESG 1.2 (learning outcomes - level and profile, international comparability, labour market needs, involvement of stakeholders, ECTS, student practice, curriculum, etc.), rules and guidelines for its development - ESG 1.9, planned teaching methods and evaluation of student achievement - ESG 1.3, conditions for programme delivery - ESG 1.5 and 1.6 (teachers'

qualifications, resources - classrooms, laboratories, equipment, library, student administration, student support, counselling etc.). The procedure also assesses the internal quality assurance - ESG 1.1 (compliance of the proposed study programme with strategic objectives, involvement of students and other stakeholders, ethical aspect, feedback on student satisfaction, etc.), information management, with regard to improving the quality of study programme - ESG 1.7, as well as transparency - ESG 1.8.

In an effort to encourage the development of quality assurance in Croatian higher education, the national legislation introduced a requirement for all Croatian HEIs to establish internal quality assurance systems. Since this process only started during the first audit cycle, decision of the ASHE Accreditation Council was to conduct the procedure of **external quality assurance audit** at all public universities and polytechnics in the Republic of Croatia. Audit criteria are fully in line with ESG, Part I (2005), and for the most part with the revised ESG, Part I (2015). Additional adjustments have been made during the development of the new audit model.

Audit procedure was used to assess whether HEIs have functional quality assurance systems, compliant with ESG Part I, that include both internal and external stakeholders, committed to their responsibility in achieving institutional mission, vision, implementing policies and strategies. Audit assessed whether and how HEIs plan and implement their activities, ensure standards and quality, and develop their own processes (ESG 1.1). The goal was to encourage the development of quality culture based on cyclic and objective self-evaluation (internal QA audit), which, combined with external evaluation, stimulates the development of a higher education institution as a whole (ESG 1.10). Special attention was paid to assessing the effectiveness and fitness-for-purpose of the chosen model of internal evaluation, the internal QAS structure (QA centres/offices, stakeholder advisory boards, etc.), defining responsibilities, planning, and continuous capacity building, especially in the field of quality assurance. Audit assessed the functionality of the established quality assurance mechanisms, particularly in management processes, teaching and research (ESG 1.1, 1.2 and 1.9), and whether these are appropriately documented; the aspect of strategic planning and how the strategic documents are produced, whether they are revised and if their implementation is monitored by set quality indicators (ESG 1.1); functionality of institutional system of collecting and analysing data, and the use of these analyses in planning, adopting development policies, improvement, stimulating innovation and

sustainable development (ESG 1.7). It should be noted that the majority of Croatian HEIs, in addition to the national information system ISVU, also use a supplemental, customized IT solution for monitoring their processes. Some areas for improvement were identified with regard to public information (ESG 1.8.). In the next evaluation cycle HEIs are expected (and were recommended) to shift the focus from publishing input parameters towards publishing information on results and outcomes of their activities, as well as to align Croatian and English versions of their websites, in order to further increase their visibility in EHEA and ERA.

Considering that the quality and positioning of higher education institutions are closely linked with the quality of study programmes and qualifications, evaluating the effectiveness of processes related to design, approval and revision (ESG 1.2), as well as monitoring and periodic review of the accredited study programmes (ESG 1.9.) were crucial for an overall assessment of the effectiveness of quality assurance system. In the next cycle, audit will assess whether the recommendations for improvement regarding these standards were implemented, and how they are applied on lifelong learning programmes and the implementation of CroQF. Criteria related to ESG 1.3 and 1.4 were used to assess whether the application of learning outcomes and ECTS encouraged and contributed to the modernization of teaching, active learning and raising the quality of student practice and student assessment throughout the entire study cycle, from clearly defined and publicly available enrolment policies, structured student support (tutoring, mentoring, scholarships), to recognising and rewarding excellence. Criteria related to ESG 1.5 and 1.6 were used to assess institutional planning with regard to the development of human and material resources, criteria for employment and evaluation of staff (both teaching and non-teaching), support to self-evaluation, professional development of staff, criteria for advancement and rewarding, and monitoring the satisfaction of employees.

Audit procedure also included a six-month follow-up phase, during which HEIs implemented expert panels' recommendations from the first audit report, and provided analyses of the improvements carried out, as an evidence of their QA systems' effectiveness. Upon completion of the follow-up phase, expert panels would draft a final report, including a final assessment of the level of development and efficiency of HEIs' quality assurance systems. Out of 32 higher education institutions audited in the period 2010- 2015, 14 fulfilled the criteria and were awarded

with a certificate for a developed QA system. All final reports were published on ASHE website. Audit procedures carried out in the first cycle indicate a need for continuous improvement of HEIs' quality assurance systems, and the development of competencies of HEIs' internal auditors.

ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

In the planning of the first cycle of external evaluations, the main consideration was the fact that up until then Croatian higher education institutions had never gone through external evaluation on a system-wide level, following common methodology and criteria. Thus the main objective of the first cycle was to re-accredit all Croatian institutions of higher education, in accordance with the ESG, and to check whether they meet the prescribed minimum quality criteria for carrying out higher education and scientific research activities and delivering study programmes. The aim of the procedure was to determine the level of quality of Croatian HEIs and improve their work, but also to inform the general public on their quality.

The objectives of **re-accreditation of higher education institutions** were to ensure and improve HEIs' quality, and inform the public thereof. Thus the outcomes of this procedure were formal: confirmation on compliance / denial of licence / letter of expectation, as well as a quality assessment with recommendations for improvement. Considering that the procedure was carried out at all Croatian HEIs, with a denial of accreditation for three institutions and 30 programmes (n.b. as an indirect effect of the re-accreditation procedure, five HEIs were closed by their own volition), and given the fact that all re-accredited institutions were provided with recommendations for improvement, on which they regularly report, as well as that all re-accreditation reports were published on Agency website, we believe that the first re-accreditation cycle fully achieved its purpose.

In the next five years, ASHE plans to implement a new cycle of re-accreditation of all Croatian higher education institutions, with the focus still on ensuring and improving the quality and informing the public, but also on encouraging HEIs' continuous quality development, in line with revised ESG, Part I, and implementing recommendations from the first re-accreditation cycle.

Since the re-accreditation of higher education institutions identified certain issues with postgraduate (doctoral) university study programmes in Croatia, at the request of the competent minister ASHE launched a thematic evaluation of postgraduate (doctoral) university studies. Thematic evaluation confirmed the earlier findings, indicating a need for comprehensive reforms of postgraduate doctoral studies, which will be based on the results of **re-accreditation of postgraduate (doctoral) university studies** that was launched in 2014. Since doctoral studies are a combination of study programme and independent research work, the procedure required new and specific criteria with an additional focus on research resources, individual student support, transparency, and fair and efficient evaluation of candidates, proposed research topics and theses defense. Re-accreditation of doctoral studies based on these adopted criteria is currently underway and should be completed in two years.

In addition to re-accreditation, during the past five years ASHE also conducted the **initial accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes**. The purpose of this procedure was to ensure that all new HEIs and study programmes meet the necessary academic criteria of quality, thus protecting potential students and general public from unsuitable applicants. The outcome of this procedure was also formal, i.e. issuance or denial of licence. Given that in the last five years only one new HEI met the conditions for the issuance of the licence (with more than 30 institutions being established in the period before that), we believe that this procedure ensures the quality of the higher education system to a significant extent. Updated with experience so far and adapted to the revised ESG, the initial accreditation procedure will continue in the following period, upon requests received. In addition, there are plans to interlink this procedure with the evaluation of study programmes for CroQF Register.

The aim of **external quality assurance audit** was to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of quality assurance systems at Croatian HEIs, in order to stimulate quality culture and continuous development of processes and activities based on full and objective self-evaluation. Audit procedure included a six-month follow-up phase, during which higher education institutions carried out improvements in line with the expert panels' recommendations. Evaluated HEIs that have met the ASHE criteria were awarded with certificates for an effective quality assurance system. The fact, however, that a certificate was awarded to 14 out of 32 institutions audited by

the end of 2015 indicates that additional efforts are needed with regard to quality culture and human resources development.

In the next evaluation cycle the focus will be on the effect internal and external evaluations have on institutional development, management and achieving mission and vision. In view of plans for the development of new evaluation procedures, available human resources, and burden imposed on higher education institutions by different evaluation procedures, audit procedure will in the next cycle be carried out only at the request of higher education institutions.

In developing methodologies and documentation based on which the evaluation procedures were carried out, particular importance was placed on the objectives of each of these procedures. Members of ASHE Accreditation Council, comprising representatives of various stakeholders, were also included in drafting process, and upon its completion all the documents underwent a public review process. Audit procedure was additionally discussed at the Rectors' Conference session, and tested through a pilot-project. Procedures were reviewed by foreign reviewers, with final version of the documents adopted by the Accreditation Council and published on ASHE website.

During the first cycle, ASHE continuously collected feedback on the criteria and quality of individual procedures, as well as recommendations for their improvement.

In the **re-accreditation** procedure, questionnaires were sent to evaluated HEIs and panel members after each round of evaluations, collecting feedback (e.g. on the quality of workshops/seminars, quality and applicability of criteria and guidelines for preparation of self-evaluation reports, quality of the expert panel and their final report, quality of ASHE support, perceived overall value of the whole procedure, etc.), which was used for annual analyses.

In the **initial accreditation** procedure, questionnaires were sent to evaluated institutions and panel members after each accreditation. The results were used in the analysis of the entire evaluation period.

In the **audit** procedure, questionnaires were sent to both the evaluated institutions and audit panel members upon the completion of each procedure, collecting feedback on their satisfaction with quality and applicability of criteria and guidelines, quality of the expert panel / audit report /

ASHE support, etc., as well as recommendations for improvement. Feedback was also collected during annual seminars/workshops that were organised for certified ASHE auditors. The information was regularly analysed, and the analyses included in the annual meta-evaluations, to be published on the Agency website.

At the end of the first evaluation cycle, ASHE conducted a comprehensive stakeholder survey regarding the impact of external evaluation procedures, and produced the analysis thereof. In addition to surveys, ASHE employees participated in a number of meetings with representatives of higher education institutions, sessions of the university senates and faculty councils, as well as sessions of the Croatian Rectors' Conference and Croatian Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, taking the opportunity to gather and exchange information on external evaluation procedures, their strengths and weaknesses, and improvements required. The information collected presented a starting point for further development of these procedures, and was used in the revision of documents upon which external evaluations will be implemented in the next cycle.

Some degree of flexibility was introduced in the system of external evaluation in 2009, when public universities were allowed self-accreditation of new study programmes. New evaluation model will allow for even more flexibility - programme evaluation for CroQF will be optional, as will the external quality assurance audit. Upon the completion of the next re-accreditation cycle, ASHE will recommend that those institutions which have successfully passed the second re-accreditation be exempt from the procedure in the third cycle. Development of new, optional evaluation procedures, focused on specific topics of interest, is also planned for the following period; procedures such as evaluation of internationalisation, social impact, programme evaluation for professional qualifications, etc.

ASHE does not have specific regulations regarding cross-border quality assurance activities. At the request of the International School for Social and Business Studies, Celje, Slovenia, during 2015 the Agency carried out its first external evaluation abroad - audit of HEI's quality assurance system. The evaluation was conducted as a pilot procedure, based on the decision of the ASHE Management Board, and for an agreed fee from the institution. Experience gained from the

successful implementation of this procedure will be used in future development of relevant regulations.

At the request of the Ministry, ASHE will also conduct the re-accreditation of the University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The reasons behind launching this procedure is the fact that University is partly funded by the Republic of Croatia, that Croatian students comprise approx. 20% of its student body, and that a large number of its graduates is oriented to the Croatian labour market. The implementation of this procedure, scheduled for autumn 2016, is thus in the interest of both the Republic of Croatia and the University of Mostar.

ASHE was one of the participants in the Erasmus + *ROCCO* project, aimed at implementing changes in the national legislation and introducing a European approach to quality assurance of joint study programmes. The result of this project was a proposal of a single procedure for joint studies, which could be carried out by any EQAR-registered agency, for those Croatian HEIs that are not public universities and have to undergo initial accreditation. In addition, Croatian HEIs' joint programmes would not have to be re-accredited; a single programme evaluation carried out by any agency listed in EQAR would suffice. After the proposal is adopted by the legislature, ASHE will develop the process wherein the Accreditation Council adopts decisions by other agencies, as well as its own evaluation procedure for joint studies, in order to become eligible for the implementation of said procedure at request. In this, ASHE will make use of the experience from *ROCCO*, but also *CeQuInt* project aimed at evaluating internationalisation, and other ECA projects related to joint studies.

One of the outcomes of *ROCCO* project was also a proposal for the regulation of cross-border activities of Croatian higher education institutions. Upon the adoption of relevant legislation, ASHE will adjust its processes accordingly, in line with best international practice.

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

All external evaluation procedures are carried out consistently in accordance with the pre-arranged procedures and documents. Stakeholders were involved in the drafting of the documents

and procedures which were made available on the Agency's website. All external evaluation procedures consist of the following stages: the drafting of self-evaluation by the HEI, a site-visit of an expert panel to an evaluated institution, the drafting of a final evaluation report and follow-up. There are certain differences regarding some elements during the implementation of these processes, as explained below.

Re-accreditation of HEIs is carried out in accordance with the document *Procedure for Re-accreditation of Higher Education Institutions (Annex 5)*. The first five-year re-accreditation cycle has shown the current procedure to be effective, while only minor modifications to the procedure are planned for the next cycle of re-accreditation.

Higher education institutions have assessed the stage of the drafting of self-evaluation in accordance with the *Guidelines for the drafting of self-evaluation of higher education institutions* to be particularly useful, although this was a new experience for most higher education institutions. It was necessary to put a lot of effort into systematically gathering information about all activities carried out by higher education institutions, which was necessary for the drafting of self-evaluation. In light of this, we are planning to simplify the guidelines for the drafting of self-evaluation in the new cycle of re-accreditation, i.e. the necessary quantitative data will be better structured and inserted directly into the upgraded information system. This should facilitate the drafting of self-evaluation for higher education institutions, and allow the Agency to make better comparisons of higher education institutions based on the information contained in self-evaluation. In the next cycle of re-accreditation, we will continue to provide support to higher education institutions in the drafting of self-evaluation, by organising several workshops on specific topics (learning outcomes, Croatian Qualifications Framework and revised ESG). Our goal is to allow HEIs to produce clearer, more concise, meaningful and objective self-evaluation documents that will first of all help them assess their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as provide a better basis for carrying out external evaluation. So far, an Agency's coordinator has had the task of reviewing self-evaluation and checking that it contains all the necessary formal elements, but the Agency is planning to modify the re-accreditation procedure in the next cycle to include the possibility of returning the self-evaluation to a higher education institution for revision.

The site visit typically lasted two days under a pre-arranged site-visit protocol, and the expert panel was assisted by a coordinator and interpreter working at the Agency. One-day workshop for the expert panel is usually organized the day before the site visit, while in the next cycle the Agency is planning to organise workshops throughout the whole year, at least for Croatian panel members and students. The plan is also to make the site visit protocol more flexible, to allow certain impromptu meetings if necessary and to leave expert panels more time to review the evidence and documents prepared by higher education institutions. We are aware that expert panels play a crucial role in the re-accreditation procedure and we believe that the greatest strengths of the procedure lie in a careful selection of expert panel members based on public calls, using clear criteria and mechanisms for preventing conflicts of interest, having a large number of foreign members coming from recognized European and international institutions with relevant QA experience, as well as having student population involved in the procedure, which the Agency will continue to observe and apply in the future.

With regard to the preparation of reports, expert panel members particularly commended the Guide containing clarifications of certain criteria that allows for a more consistent assessment of the degree of quality and more reliable decision-making. With that in mind, a similar document is being prepared for the next cycle of re-accreditation in line with refined criteria. Certain difficulties were identified in the procedure, particularly with regard to the fact that expert panels had to draw up the first draft of the report immediately after the site visits which was often done late in the evenings and was very exhausting. Therefore, should appropriate funding be available, the Agency is planning to allow more time for the drafting of the final report. The coordinator of the Agency participated in the preparation of reports along with expert panels by providing them with necessary clarifications of the criteria, as well as of special characteristics of the Croatian system of higher education, but without having influence on the quality grade. The expert panel usually delivered the final report one month after the site visit. Typically the president of the expert panel delivered the first draft and other members, including an Agency representative, made comments and suggestions for improvement. We are also planning to reassess the grading scale for quality assessment and to further work out the rules for decision-making by the Accreditation Council, as well as to introduce a possibility for HEIs to issue an official comment on the accreditation recommendation (not just on the report, as it has previously been practiced).

Furthermore, special attention will be paid to the follow-up stage. One of the strengths of the previous re-accreditation cycle lied in the fact that the law stipulates that one of the possible outcomes of the procedure was the issuance of a letter of expectation. Higher education institutions which have received letters of expectation took the task of eliminating identified deficiencies very seriously, which was verified during the follow-up in which some expert panel members participated if necessary, and a new site visit to the HEI was organised if deemed necessary by the Accreditation Council. Accredited HEIs were also required to submit a plan of actions and regularly report on the carried out improvements and we intend to include these elements in the next re-accreditation cycle, to determine more precisely whether higher education institutions have really worked toward quality improvement.

As discussed before, a number of these novelties have been already included in the **Re-accreditation of doctoral programmes**. Because the first site visits of that review were being implemented at the time of completion of this report, it is too early to comment on its usefulness and effectiveness.

Initial accreditation of a study programme and/or a higher education institution is carried out in accordance with the *Procedure for Initial Accreditation for Performing Higher Education Activity* and *Initial Accreditation for Implementation of Study Programme (Annex 8)*. During the five years of its implementation, the procedure has proven to be effective and minor modifications are planned in a manner similar to the one described in the re-accreditation procedure (refining the guidelines for the drafting of self-evaluation, refining the criteria for initial accreditation with precise explanations of criteria, the possibility of sending self-evaluation for revision, more flexible organisation of site visits, with more time allowed for the drafting of the final report, continuous training of potential expert panel members throughout the year, introducing the possibility of an official reply to the accreditation recommendation, etc.).

The elements of initial accreditation we wish to improve more significantly based on good practice derived from re-accreditation primarily include the composition of expert panels, in which the participation of a foreign member has not been mandatory up to now, which we will change in the next cycle, as well as follow-up on the quality of a new study programme following

accreditation and the start of delivery of a study programme. These changes will be introduced in parallel to developing the programme evaluation for the CroQF.

The **audit** procedure is primarily enhancement-oriented. Members of audit panels are trained regularly, because the training is also aimed at capacity-building of Croatian institutions to self-improve. The Agency Audit Department also performs regular surveys of the QAS activities and organises workshops for the relevant institutional staff. Similarly to re-accreditation, the audit procedure was assessed very beneficially by all stakeholders (the average grade for all questions was above 4, with the 1-5 scale). The model was first piloted at 3 HEIs and it was not necessary to introduce significant changes during the cycle in the accepted model, criteria or the manner of training auditors. It was seen that the 6-month follow-up period after the first report enables the evaluated HEIs to implement a portion of the panel recommendations given in the first report. This resulted in increased effectiveness of the evaluated QA system and higher grades in the final report. The follow-up period of course prolonged the procedure (it takes about 18 months to complete). We realised that the coordinators needed to motivate a part of the HEIs to collect relevant feedback. Some stakeholders participating in the interviews during the site visits were interested in receiving the feedback questionnaires on the audit procedure sooner. The first cycle of audits will be completed in 2016, after which a new model of voluntary audits is to be developed. Considering the development and the experience of HEIs after the first audit cycle and their needs as reported to us, in the next audit cycle we will primarily change the follow-up phase. Due to the importance of internationalisation, we also plan to change the composition of the audit panels, so that the five-member panel will be composed out of two foreign academics and one Croatian, one representative of the business community and one student. This would require HEIs to prepare documentation also in English. In the next cycle we plan to continue with our model of providing basic training to the auditors, also providing them with additional trainings annually if necessary. Our on-line trainings will also be improved and new content will be added.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

The external evaluations are carried out by ASHE-trained expert panels.

The composition of expert panels in **re-accréditation** and the criteria for their selection are defined by the *Procedure for re-accréditation of higher education institutions* (Annex 5). Re-accréditation procedure is conducted by a five-member panel, comprising a student representative and four university professors or scientists from research institutes, elected into scientific-teaching or artistic-teaching grades in scientific fields in which the evaluated HEI delivers its study programmes (in re-accréditation of polytechnics and colleges, at least two panel members are college professors). Alternatively, one representative of the business sector/industry may be included in the expert panel instead of a university or college professor. In some instances, depending on the profile of the evaluated HEI, there is a possibility of appointing a larger panel of experts. Although the relevant regulations stipulate that at least one panel member should be a foreign expert, in the re-accréditation procedures conducted so far there were usually 2 or 3 foreign panel members, and in cases of HEIs of unique profiles, or the 'old' faculties, whose alumni include a significant number of Croatian academics in a particular scientific field, expert panels were composed exclusively of foreign members, so as to avoid potential conflicts of interest. In re-accréditation procedures conducted so far, a total of 619 reviewers participated as expert panel members, 353 of whom were foreign experts, mostly from Western Europe. The good practice of including a large number of foreign experts shall continue in the next re-accréditation cycle, combined with efforts to involve more representatives of the labour market.

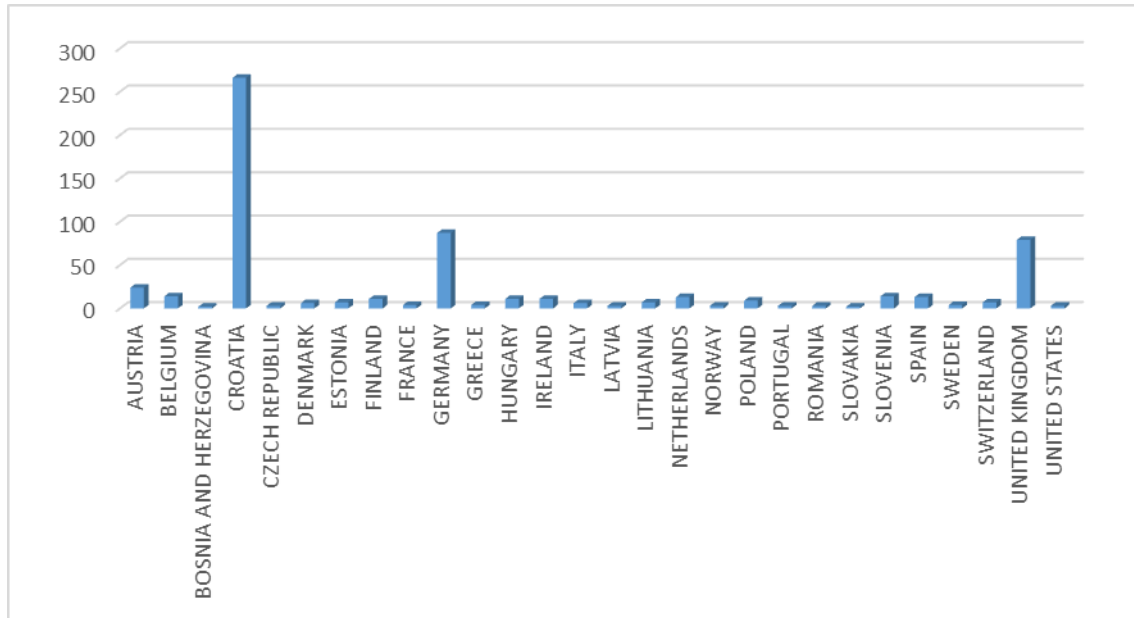


Chart 1: Expert panel members in re-accreditation procedures

Source: ASHE, 2016

In the re-accreditation procedure, ASHE prepares proposals of potential panel members from candidates who answer a public call that is issued in Croatia and abroad, those contacted directly, and those elected from the existing pool of experts, currently comprising 861 members. Based on these proposals, expert panels are appointed by the Accreditation Council. All panel members sign *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement*. Higher education institutions have the opportunity to comment on the composition of expert panels. A one-day training course is organised for the panel members before the site-visit to the evaluated HEI. In the next re-accreditation cycle, regular annual workshops and training courses will be organised by ASHE, in order to further expand the database of experts.

The composition of the expert panel in the **initial accreditation** and criteria for their selection are defined by the *Procedure for initial accreditation for the implementation of study programmes (Annex 8)*. The procedure involves a three-member panel, comprising **two** university or college professors, appointed to scientific-teaching, artistic-teaching or teaching grade, and **one** student. Alternatively, one representative of the business sector/industry may be included in the expert panel instead of one academic. Although panels occasionally included a foreign expert, this was not mandatory. In the future procedures, however, the expert panels will comprise at least one

foreign member, combined with efforts to involve more representatives of the labour market. In the initial accreditation procedure, ASHE prepares proposals of potential panel members from candidates contacted directly, and those elected from the existing pool of experts, whereupon panels are officially appointed by the Accreditation Council. The panels undergo a one-day training course before the site-visit to the institution, and all panel members sign *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement*. Higher education institutions have the opportunity to comment on the composition of expert panels.

In **audit**, panel members are selected from ASHE database of certified/trained auditors. Expert panels (or audit committees) comprise two representatives of HEIs or scientific organisations, one of whom is always a foreign expert, a representative of the business sector experienced in quality assurance, a student representative and a representative of ASHE. Members are selected in line with the criteria set out in the *Ordinance on External Quality Assurance Audit (Annex 10)*. The Agency proposes potential panel members, whereupon the audit committees are officially appointed by the Accreditation Council. The evaluated higher education institution is informed and can comment on the composition of the expert panel, and all panel members sign *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement*.

Once or twice a year ASHE organises trainings for new auditors, updating the database of certified auditors, but also offers the possibility of an online training for foreign experts. Additional seminars and workshops are organised for certified audit experts, allowing them to further improve their competencies and be up-to-date with new developments and good practice in the field of higher education quality assurance.

ASHE-certified audit experts were also appointed for the first international external evaluation that the Agency carried out during 2015. For a pilot audit procedure of a HEI in Slovenia, a five-member audit committee was appointed, comprising - as with audit procedures conducted in Croatia - two representatives of HEIs (one of whom a foreign expert), one student representative, one representative of the business sector and one representative of ASHE. One of the two academics (professor at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) and the student representative

(University of Maribor, Slovenia) had a function of national experts in this audit committee, and served as a link with the relevant national legislation and practice.

Re-accreditation of the University of Mostar will be the first ASHE re-accreditation carried out abroad, and will include an international panel of experts, comprising members from the Republic of Croatia and other EU countries. Panel members in this first international re-accreditation will include those experts who have already participated in re-accreditation in Croatia, and are familiar with the procedure.

Since it relies heavily on foreign experts, ASHE often recommends its trained experts to other quality assurance agencies, and asks for similar recommendations in return. Within CEENQA and ECA, ASHE participated in the initiatives for developing a common database of experts. This, however, is still an ongoing project as it requires significant efforts from both the agencies and experts, due to legal restrictions regarding the protection of data privacy.

ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

The outcomes of all external evaluation procedures (listed under 2.3) are based on clearly defined criteria, which are published on ASHE website. Prior to the evaluation, ASHE organises workshops for higher education institutions, with discussions including procedure outcomes and relevant criteria against which the institutions are evaluated. Criteria are also discussed during training courses for members of expert panels, where procedure coordinators work closely with their respective panels.

ASHE Accreditation Council issues opinions on final evaluation reports. *Rules of Procedure of the Agency for Science and Higher Education Accreditation Council* define the way in which the Council reaches its decisions. After the completion of a re-accreditation procedure and upon receiving a well-drafted final report by the expert panel, the Accreditation Council first votes for favourable/positive recommendation, addressed to the minister responsible for science and higher education, for the issuance of a licence for performing the activity or part of the activities. Positive/favourable recommendation is adopted when at least two thirds of the present members

vote for it. In case accreditation recommendation does not get a majority vote, the Council shall vote for a recommendation addressed to the competent minister to issue a letter of expectation. Recommendation to issue a letter of expectation shall be adopted when at least two thirds of the Council members agree upon it. If in aforementioned cases the members do not agree by vote, the Accreditation Council shall adopt a recommendation to deny licence.

The first **re-accreditation** cycle was focused on assessing the fulfilment of necessary quality requirements, as prescribed by the *Accreditation Ordinance (Annex 3)*, as well as providing a quality grade in line with the *Criteria for the assessment of quality of higher education institutions within universities / Criteria for the assessment of quality of polytechnics and colleges (Annex 6)*. Criteria for the assessment of quality were adopted by the Accreditation Council and Croatian Rectors' Conference, they underwent a public review process and two international reviews, and were published on ASHE website. In order to ensure the consistency of their application, the Agency developed a *Guide to criteria in the assessment of the quality of HEIs*. Revised criteria are currently being developed for the second cycle of re-accreditation; a preliminary proposal has been prepared by the Agency, in cooperation with the working group comprising representatives of the Accreditation Council. After the proposal is accepted by the Council, it will be submitted to a public review. The final version of the document will be adopted by the Accreditation Council.

In the first cycle of **initial accreditation**, the focus was set on assessing the fulfilment of necessary quality requirements, as prescribed by the *Accreditation Ordinance (Annex 3)*, which is published on ASHE website. New regulations are currently being developed that will define the necessary accreditation criteria.

In **audit**, the expert panel assesses the level of development and efficiency of HEI's quality assurance system against the criteria defined by the *Audit Manual*. Audit criteria were the outcome of the international CARDS 2003 project *Furtherance of the Agency for Science and Higher Education in its Quality Assurance Role and the Development of a Supporting Information System*; they were tested in pilot procedures, underwent a public review process and were adopted by the Croatian Rectors' Conference. The criteria were also adopted by ASHE

Accreditation Council. The consistency of their application is ensured through appropriate training of expert panel members, higher education institutions and coordinators, and through collecting and analysing relevant feedback. ASHE is currently developing revised audit criteria, in line with ESG (2015) that will be used in the second cycle.

ESG 2.6 Reporting

Full reports from all evaluation procedures, as well as all formal decisions, are published on the ASHE website.

In **re-accreditation**, the report is produced by the entire expert panel; the first draft is made right after the site-visit to HEI, and the final report is submitted a month later. Before being submitted to the Accreditation Council, the final draft of the report is sent to the evaluated institution for a review of factual accuracy and comments. HEI's statement thereof is attached to the report. Full report, HEI's statement and accreditation recommendation are published on ASHE website, along with the report summary.

In **initial accreditation**, the report is produced by the entire expert panel and it is prepared after the site-visit to HEI, as per the final report template. Full report is published on ASHE website, along with the accreditation recommendation. Certain improvements have been made to the guidelines for drafting the final report, which will be implemented in the next evaluation cycle.

In **audit**, the entire expert panel produces two reports, both of which are adopted by the Accreditation Council. The first report is drafted after the site-visit and contains an assessment of the effectiveness of evaluated quality assurance system, with recommendations for improvement in the follow-up phase. This report is not published, but submitted to the evaluated HEI. The second audit report is drafted upon the completion of the follow-up phase, and is based on a HEI's follow-up report and analysis of the effectiveness of implemented activities. Full report, after being adopted by the Accreditation Council, is published on ASHE website, along with the final conclusion of the Council and a summary of the report in English. Both reports are drafted according to the template defined in the *Audit Manual*. The task of the audit procedure

coordinator is to ensure that reports are made in accordance with the provided template, and that they are uniform in structure, content, style and language. In audit procedures carried out abroad, reports follow the same format, and are published in English.

In the first external evaluation of ASHE, the panel identified some issues with the visibility and readability of reports. This was one of the main reasons behind Agency's participation in *EQArep*, international project lead by ENQA. In order to improve the availability of information, a template for report summary was developed during this project, which was implemented in all ASHE evaluation procedures, including those already completed. Summaries of external evaluation reports are also published on webpages where future students select and apply to study programmes (n.b. since 2010, Croatia has the system of centralised admission to study programmes through the National Information System for Application to Higher Education Institutions - NISPVU, maintained and supported by ASHE's Central Application Office). In this way, candidates are provided with information on conditions for enrolment, but also on quality of individual study programmes.

The visibility of reports has been additionally improved by shortcuts on ASHE homepage that allow a direct access to all accreditation recommendations and related reports. Based on the project results and collected feedback, improvements were made to the re-accreditation report template, which now contains the following elements for each evaluated HEI: a short description of the evaluated higher education institution, a short description of the re-accreditation procedure, composition of the expert panel, expert panel's conclusions, including advantages and disadvantages of the institution, examples of good practice, recommendations for quality improvement, and detailed analysis based on standards and criteria. All these elements will also be present in the second re-accreditation cycle. Within the *EQArep* project, a survey was conducted among the stakeholders on the readability and availability of evaluation reports, the results of which were published in ENQA report. ASHE repeated the survey in 2015 among its Croatian stakeholders. According to the results, only 10% of stakeholders had difficulties in finding the report, and only 0.7% assessed the report readability as poor. A consortium of civil society organisations is currently carrying out the project *QualityWatch*, aimed at providing the public with better insight into the quality of higher education institutions in individual Croatian

counties, which ASHE fully supports. The project is expected to result in some additional recommendations for improving ASHE evaluation reports.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

In the **re-accreditation** procedure, higher education institutions have the possibility to object to the composition of the expert panel, providing the objection is justified and substantiated. The final decision is made by the ASHE Accreditation Council. Furthermore, higher education institutions are given the opportunity to comment on the final evaluation report, the report being one of the relevant documents on which Accreditation Council decisions and Agency recommendations are based.

In case of a licence denial, the institution is informed on the pending decision before it is adopted by the Accreditation Council, and at that stage HEI has the right to submit a complaint. As defined in the *Procedure for re-accreditation of higher education institutions (Annex 5)*, published on ASHE website, on the basis of this complaint a special complaint committee is formed by the Accreditation Council, comprising three of its members, which reviews all documentation from the re-accreditation procedure in question, and issues a final decision. By the end of 2015, the Accreditation Council issued 150 opinions and received 22 complaints.

It should be noted that a higher education institution included in the plan of re-accreditation may request a postponement for the next academic year, providing a valid reason. Final decision on the postponement is issued by the Accreditation Council.

The revised re-accreditation procedure will introduce additional possibility of objecting to all accreditation recommendations, which will be considered by a specially appointed committee that need not necessarily be comprised of Accreditation Council members.

In the **initial accreditation** procedure, higher education institution has the option of commenting on the composition of the expert panel and final report, as stipulated in the *Procedure for initial accreditation for the implementation of study programmes (Annex 8)*. The revised procedure will introduce additional possibility of objecting to the accreditation recommendation.

ASHE website also contains information on complaints and appeals in the audit procedure. Additional information on complaint and appeal procedures, as defined by the *Ordinance on External Quality Assurance Audit (Annex 10)*, is also provided at annual workshops organised for HEIs that are included in the audit plan for the following year. HEIs are given the opportunity to object to the composition of the expert panel, and the Accreditation Council decides whether the objection is justified. If HEI finds that an expert panel did not carry out the procedure in accordance with the *Audit Manual* and *Ordinance (Annex 10)*, or is not satisfied with audit results, it can file an appeal to the Agency within 15 days after receiving the audit report. HEI's appeal is sent to the expert panel, which submits its comments on the grounds for the appeal. The Accreditation Council receives both the appeal and panel's official response, and decides to either initiate the appeals procedure, or reject the appeal. If it decides to initiate the appeals procedure, the Accreditation Council appoints an appeal committee comprising 3 experts from the audit expert database (1 of whom is a student). The appeals committee reviews all the documents pertaining to the aforementioned audit procedure and makes a final evaluation within 30 days. In the first 5-year cycle, all audit procedures were carried out without appeals.

12. INFORMATION AND OPINIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS

During the processes of re-accreditation, initial accreditation and audit, ASHE regularly collected feedback from higher education institutions and Croatian and foreign reviewers involved in procedures, and drafted analyses thereof.

Stakeholders involved in the process of **re-accreditation** best assessed the criterion relating to the usefulness of the procedure. It should be noted that higher education institutions assessed as the most useful the collection of data about their activities and the development of self-evaluation, as it allowed them to better grasp their own strengths and weaknesses. Members of expert panels gave relatively high grades to ASHE's support to the entire procedure, while foreign expert panel members gave slightly lower grades to the training of expert panels than Croatian members of expert panels, which indicates that it is necessary to further improve the training of foreign experts, especially with regard to the specific characteristics of Croatian system of higher education.

The lowest grade was given to the clarity and applicability of criteria, however, all the stakeholders assessed this criterion somewhat better in 2015 than in preceding years. The reason for this (at least for the expert panel members) might lie in the development of *A guide to criteria for the assessment of quality of higher education institutions within universities*, which explains how to best assess the degree of development of a certain criterion, providing a better insight in the methodology and the methods of operation of various expert panels, in order to achieve an objective and balanced assessment of various institutions.

Criteria problematic to HEIs are the ones regarding issues that are beyond their control, which either depend on the situation in the country (such as the ban of new employment) or the Ministry. Also, in the case of integrated universities, certain criteria are related to the university, rather than to a particular department undergoing evaluation.

Survey results indicate a problem regarding the applicability of common criteria to all scientific fields and areas (which is particularly evident in the evaluation of the artistic field), as well as the

one of evaluating large institutions comprising many departments (in several scientific fields), where criteria are reportedly used to provide an "average rating" in a rather simple manner.

The clarity of guidelines for writing the self-evaluation received mixed grades. Feedback from HEIs is particularly important for this criterion. The increase in grades over the years could be explained by the use of the forum and the achieved stability of the procedure. The Agency received a lot of commendations for the help provided via forum, by telephone and by e-mail.

Based on the data obtained, ASHE is developing a new, improved re-accreditation model with a lower number of criteria; additional attention is paid to their clarity and relevance, better adaption to some specific characteristics (integrated universities, faculties with a high number of programmes in different scientific fields, artistic field), and greater emphasis is placed on the output parameters (learning outcomes, pass rate, completion rate, employment options, etc.). Likewise, the guidelines for making self-evaluation reports were also modified; they were made more concise and better aligned with the criteria. All figures will in the future be entered directly into the information system, which is currently being upgraded by the University Computing Centre (SRCE), in cooperation with the Agency. This should facilitate the drafting of self-evaluation documents for higher education institutions, and also enable a better comparison of the data for the Agency. The Agency is planning to further improve training of expert panel members by introducing a continuous training model, which would be carried out throughout the year, rather than a one-day workshop before the site visit, as was practiced during the first cycle. Certain changes will be introduced to site visit protocols, to allow extra time for expert panel members to review the documentation and examine evidence of the facts presented in self-evaluation documents.

The criterion related to the support provided by ASHE in the implementation of the procedure, as well as usefulness of the procedure, received the best grades from the stakeholders involved in the **initial accreditation** procedure. The criteria related to the applicability of the initial accreditation criteria and the clarity of guidelines for drafting proposals for new study programmes received the lowest grades.

The Agency is currently developing an improved initial accreditation model in which the criteria will be changed, with greater attention paid to their clarity and applicability. Greater emphasis will also be put on the output parameters (learning outcomes), and the instructions for drafting proposals of new study programmes will be simplified. The Agency will introduce an ongoing training of potential expert panel members throughout the year. The new initial accreditation model should be fully compatible with the revised ESG, with mandatory participation of foreign experts in procedures.

ASHE regularly collected feedback from the stakeholders involved in the **audit procedure** following each audit, and the analyses of the data are an integral part of annual meta-evaluation reports published on ASHE website. Analyses of satisfaction surveys sent to higher education institutions regarding this procedure throughout the first cycle have shown that the biggest challenge for higher education institutions is the applicability of ESG 1.1 and ESG 1.2. Stakeholders gave the best grades to cooperation with ASHE coordinators during the procedure, and assessed expert panels as objective, qualified and well-intentioned. The procedure itself, i.e., the recommendations provided by expert panels in the reports, were generally viewed by higher education institutions as useful for further development of internal quality assurance mechanisms. Members of expert panels gave high grades to the support provided by ASHE during audit procedures, particularly with regard to informing and training of auditors.

Most common suggestions for improvement submitted by higher education institutions in the period 2010–2015 were related to satisfaction surveys (with regard to a long period from the site visit to the completion of the procedure, and how it impacts the relevancy of data submitted); the need for clearer instructions/guidelines for the drafting of audit documents (for example, internal audit reports) that would take into account the specific characteristics of evaluated higher education institution, and the need for additional training in quality assurance. It was suggested that after the audit procedure is completed and report published, the results be additionally presented at workshops/round tables that would be attended by stakeholders.

Based on the feedback collected from stakeholders, ASHE has changed the method of implementing the survey during the first cycle, which is now conducted in an electronic form. The most common suggestions for improvement will be implemented in the second audit cycle, in which the entire procedure will be redefined. The new audit model will, among other, reduce

the time elapsed from the end of the site visit to the submission of the questionnaire (as the procedure will be significantly shorter), and the instructions for higher education institutions and indicators by individual criteria and standards will be defined more clearly. The results of the procedure and suggestions for improvement will be further discussed at the meetings to be attended by relevant stakeholders from higher education institutions.

In 2015, the Agency conducted a survey on the impact of the evaluation procedures on the higher education system. Bearing in mind the ongoing advancement and the importance of self-evaluation within the context of quality culture, the analysis sought to highlight the attitude of stakeholders towards the concept of quality and the existing framework of its evaluation. The survey comprised 30 questions divided into four parts: the perception of the concept of quality; the method of reporting on the results of procedures; fitness-for-purpose of re-accreditation procedures; fitness-for-purpose of audit. Participants in the survey included representatives of various groups of stakeholders: members of the management of higher education institutions; teachers and researchers; students; alumni and employers.

Almost all participants in the survey (94.6%) agreed on the importance of evaluation for the quality of a study programme or an institution, and believe that the primary purpose of external evaluation is quality improvement. Nearly half of the respondents consider the quality of a higher education institution and/or a study programme to mean the resulting value (competencies, knowledge and skills) for the resources invested (money and time spent), and 17.2% assess the quality in terms of employment opportunities. Students, on the other hand, find the experience of studying more important.

According to students and HEIs' managements, the most important element of the programme quality is the content, only to be followed by outcomes in terms of employment opportunities, skills, knowledge and competencies. Teachers, on the other hand, find the quality that is based on the appointment into teaching grades the most important factor, which probably arises from current legislation stipulating this indicator as mandatory.

The most important aspect to be taken into account in the evaluation procedure is the obtained knowledge, skills and competencies of graduates, and competencies of teachers. The quality of a

study programme is estimated based on employment opportunities. Students perceive quality in terms of an obtained degree, and HEIs' managements assess it based on the reputation of a study programme/ institution.

Employers, teachers and management members mostly consider reports to be partially useful.

ASHE noted a positive attitude of the heads of institutions towards the evaluation procedures and the results thereof, however, it is also evident that these results are insufficiently used in the assessment of the quality of institution/programme, and as a mechanism of reform.

Re-accreditation and **audit** procedures are perceived in a positive light. Members of the management of higher education institutions responded to the procedures more positively than teachers and students, and nearly half of them are very satisfied with recommendations made by expert panels during **re-accreditation**. Heads of institutions assessed the procedure to be very useful (57.5%) or useful (37.5%), which accounts for a high rate of usefulness in total (95%). Most respondents found the re-accreditation procedure to be partially useful. Teachers and scientists at higher education institution positively evaluated the procedure.

While 48.8% of the members of management of higher education institutions are partially satisfied with **audit** procedure, 36.2% of them are very satisfied, which represents a high total usefulness rate (85%). Most teachers are satisfied with the audit procedure. In both procedures, students and employees of higher education institutions have learned the most during the preparation stage of evaluation, i.e. drafting of self-evaluation, as well as from the feedback obtained from expert panels.

Members of the management of higher education institutions consider that the biggest progress has been made in the area of institutional management, while teachers and researchers believe that improvements have been made in the area of quality assurance. The follow-up phase is the phase in which respondents learned the least, perhaps due to a large number of higher education institutions that have just entered this phase.

13. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE LAST EXTERNAL REVIEW

The first external review of ASHE in accordance with the ESG was carried out in 2011 and it resulted in a report adopted by the ENQA Management Board and the EQAR Committee, which was published on ASHE website. ENQA's Management Board accepted the decision that ASHE complies with the ESG, first having asked for a confirmation that the minister who passes final decisions on accreditation is obliged to follow accreditation recommendations of the Agency. After submitting its response, the Agency became a full member of ENQA and was registered in EQAR for a period of five years.

As one of the purposes of external evaluation is the improvement of reviewed agencies, ASHE was required to submit a Report on the progress made following recommendations for improvement during the follow-up phase, by October 2013. A short description is provided below.

Revision of existing procedures in order to avoid overlaps

ASHE uses mechanisms of internal and external feedback, based on which it conducts analyses, and improves and develops its processes, in accordance with purpose, goals and outcomes. Each year the Agency publishes reports that analyse and describe the results of external evaluation procedures carried out. At the end of the first evaluation cycle, ASHE conducted a system-wide analysis and assessed the effect of quality assurance processes on the development of higher education and science in Croatia. Additional feedback was collected through evaluation forms that were sent to stakeholders, with the aim of collecting information on their satisfaction with procedures of re-accreditation and audit, and their impact on the quality improvement at evaluated HEIs. Based on the obtained feedback and analyses of re-accreditation and audit, it was concluded that the stakeholders showed a high level of satisfaction with the implemented procedures and that the objectives, criteria, composition of expert panels and the outcomes of these procedures are different. Given the importance of the re-accreditation procedure outcome,

continuous increase of the initial accreditations of study programmes, as well as planned development of new evaluation procedures in the second cycle (implementation of CroQF, evaluation of joint studies, additional evaluations of specific segments of HEIs' activities - such as internationalisation - for the purpose of obtaining quality labels, etc.), and with regard to anticipated amendments to the Act on Quality Assurance that would regulate Agency's activities outside of Croatia, it was decided that the audit procedure will in the next evaluation cycle be an optional procedure, carried out at the request of higher education institutions.

Development of procedures for regular follow-up in re-accreditation

Re-accreditation results in an accreditation recommendation to the responsible minister for: issuing or extension of a license for carrying out activities of higher education or part of activities and the delivery of study programmes; issuing a letter of expectation for a term not exceeding three years, or denial of a license to carry out activities or part of activities. Higher education institutions undergoing evaluation which received letters of expectation for a period of one to three years were required to undertake improvements in line with the recommendations made by expert panels and, after the indicated period, submit a report to the Accreditation Council with evidence of the measures taken. The Accreditation Council then discussed whether to propose an extension or denial of accreditation. In accordance with the recommendations for further development of the follow-up procedure in re-accreditation, the Accreditation Council adopted the revised document *Procedure for re-accreditation of higher education institutions (Annex 5)* which includes an enhanced follow-up procedure for the evaluated higher education institutions that have obtained an extension of accreditation for higher education activities or part of activities and delivery of study programmes. Those higher education institutions are obliged to submit to the Accreditation Council a plan of improvement of their activities, in accordance with expert panels' recommendations, within a period of six months. The Accreditation Council then examines the plan, and a higher education institution updates the information in the Agency's information system. The quality of the plan implementation will be evaluated during the next re-accreditation cycle.

Adoption of the document *Network of higher education institutions* as the basis for initial accreditation

At the suggestion of the National Council for Higher Education, the Croatian Parliament adopted the document *Network of higher education institutions* in 2011, available on ASHE website. With the adoption of this document, all the prerequisites for the implementation of initial accreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions were met. Upon receiving a request for initial accreditation of a new study programme or a higher education institution, ASHE is first required to check the compliance of the request with the document *Network of higher education institutions*. By the end of 2015, ASHE had completed 32 procedures of initial accreditation of study programmes and one procedure of initial accreditation of a higher education institution.

Improving ASHE reports

ASHE carried out several activities aimed at the improvement of the quality of reports and their accessibility, as described in detail herein (ESG 2.6).

14. NEW CHALLENGES AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

In the past five years, a momentum was gained in the development of internal and external quality assurance system at Croatian higher education institutions, as the increased awareness of the importance of quality culture prompted institutions to establish more reliable internal quality assurance mechanisms. Activities of the Agency for Science and Higher Education contributed to this to a significant extent; the Agency conducted the first cycle of external evaluations, covering all Croatian higher education institutions and scientific organisations, but also organised workshops and seminars to help HEIs establish and develop their internal quality assurance mechanisms.

As indicated by the results of the survey on the impact of external evaluation, higher education institutions (their administrations) have a positive attitude toward these procedures, but the results thereof are not adequately used as mechanisms for reform. It is important, therefore, to encourage HEIs and competent authorities to a more efficient use of the evaluation results in implementing changes at institutional and system-wide level, respectively.

As for the students, it is our wish for them to become actively involved in debate on quality of higher education, so it becomes a useful tool by which they can increase their satisfaction with studying, and also their chances for employment after graduation.

The end of the first cycle of external evaluations coincided with the adoption of revised European standards and guidelines, and presents an opportune time to reflect on our strengths and weaknesses and to plan future activities and developments. A strong impetus was provided by a positive feedback from HEIs and other stakeholders on the impact of implemented activities on further quality improvement of higher education and science.

A major challenge at the moment is the development of new external evaluation models for the second cycle (mandatory re-accreditation and initial accreditation, and optional procedure of external quality assurance audit), which contain some improvements that were result of self-reflection and stakeholders' feedback, and additionally emphasise important elements from the

revised ESG, as described in the chapter on Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).

Another challenge we are facing is the development of new external evaluation processes, particularly the evaluation of study programmes for CroQF Register, but also new optional evaluation procedures that would be carried out at request, and would result in a quality label for a particular segment of HEI's operation (e.g., internationalisation, social impact, etc.).

The plan is to further improve ASHE's international role and presence by actively participating in international networks of quality assurance agencies in higher education, and implementing evaluation procedures abroad.

ASHE will continue to work together with its partners, the academic community and other stakeholders, in planning and implementation of future activities, include them in all the procedures and make sure their needs are met, in order to ensure, through dialogue and concerted efforts, further improvement of the quality of higher education and science in the Republic of Croatia.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Accreditation Ordinance	<i>Ordinance on the Content of a Licence and Conditions for Issuing a Licence for Performing Higher Education Activity, Carrying out a Study Programme and Re-Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions</i>
Agency	Agency for Science and Higher Education
ASHE	
Audit	External audit of quality assurance system of a higher education institution
CAO	ASHE Central Applications Office
College	School of professional higher education.
Council of Polytechnics and Colleges	The Croatian Council of Polytechnics and Colleges is composed of all deans of public and private colleges and polytechnics; it meets regularly with competences defined by the Act on Science and Higher Education
CroQF	Croatian Qualifications Framework
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ERA	European Research Area
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines for

Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

EU	European Union
HEI	Higher education institution (in Croatia this can mean a college, a polytechnic, a university or a university constituent – faculty, academy or a department)
Minister	Minister of Science, Education and Sports
ISVU	National information system for higher education institutions
Ministry	Ministry of Science, Education and Sports
<i>Network of higher education institutions and study programmes in Croatia</i>	A public document adopted by the Croatian Parliament which defines the regional and national priorities for setting up new public higher education institutions and study programmes
Polytechnic	School of professional higher education that implements at least three different studies in three fields.
QA	Quality assurance
QAS	Quality Assurance System (of a higher education institution)
Rectors' Conference	Croatian Rectors' Conference is composed of all rectors of public universities who meet regularly with competences defined by the Act on Science and Higher Education
University	An institution organizing and delivering university study programmes in at least two areas of science and / or arts, and a large number of fields within these areas, as well as interdisciplinary studies, and, exceptionally, professional study programmes

LIST OF ANNEXES

Legal acts

Annex 1 – *Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education* (Official Gazette 123/03, 198/03, 105/04, 174/04, 02/07, 46/07, 45/09, 63/11, 94/13, 139/13, 101/14, 60/15)

Annex 2 - *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education* (Official Gazette 45/09)

Annex 3 - *Ordinance on the Content of a Licence and Conditions for Issuing a Licence for Performing Higher Education Activity, Carrying out a Study Programme and Re-Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions* (Official Gazette 24/10)

General legal acts and internal legal acts of the Agency

Annex 4 - *Statute of the Agency for Science and Higher Education*

Documentation for evaluation procedures

Annex 5 - *Procedure for re-accreditation of higher education institutions*

Annex 6 - *Criteria for the assessment of quality of higher education institutions within universities /Criteria for the assessment of quality of polytechnics and colleges*

Annex 7 - *Reaccreditation of postgraduate university study programmes in Croatia: principles and criteria*

Annex 8 – *Procedure of Initial Accreditation*

Annex 9 – *Reporting Template for Initial Accreditation* (with criteria)

Annex 10 – *Ordinance on External Audit of Quality Assurance Systems at Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia*