



SELF- ASSESSMENT REPORT OF THE AGENCY FOR SCIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

MARCH, 2021



agencija za znanost i visoko obrazovanje
agency for science and higher education

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1 INTRODUCTION

Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) is to undergo its third international review to be 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).

ASHE gained full membership in these associations as early as 2011, which was deemed to be strategically important for ASHE's positioning and development, as well as for the whole higher education system in Croatia. A decade later, these memberships prove to be an important strategic decision for ASHE and its position in the European Higher Education Area.

In the year of the review, ASHE published its strategy for the coming five-year period, and one of the goals defined in the strategy is compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which is proven by memberships in ENQA and EQAR.

ASHE considers this international review as an opportunity to review its own strengths and weaknesses, as well as to reflect on the processes of quality assurance in higher education and their fitness for purpose.

In compliance with the guidelines provided, we have explained below the specific characteristics of the Croatian higher education, quality assurance processes in higher education and integration of ESG in the QA processes. Given the fact that the second cycle of external evaluation of higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia is in progress, we will use the feedback obtained from expert panels and HEIs to further improve the processes, especially the third cycle of external evaluation of higher education institutions to be carried out in the coming years, by respecting the national context and specific characteristics of the higher education system.

2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT (SAR)

Following ASHE's Director's decision to submit an application for extending membership in ENQA and listing in EQAR a work team has been established at the level of the Agency tasked with coordinating the Self-evaluation drafting process. Their first task was to agree on the methodology and dynamics of the drafting process and gather all documents to be used in the drafting of the Self-evaluation in one place. The documents include the following:

- Letter to ENQA for extending membership as of 15 October 2020,
- Online Application Form, 1 December 2020,
- Contract for the ENQA-coordinated external review of the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) including tripartite TOR between ASHE, ENQA and EQAR as of 17 November 2020,
- [ASHE 2016 Self-evaluation](#)
- [ENQA Agency Review: Agency for Science and Higher Education \(ASHE\), 2017](#),
- ENQA's confirmation of extending ASHE membership as of 3 March 2017,
- EQAR's Approval of the Application by ASHE for Inclusion on the Register as of 20 June 2017,
- ASHE Action plan for follow-up of the 2016 ENQA Review, 20 February 2018,
- ENQA's acceptance of ASHE's Progress Report to ENQA on the implementation of the recommendations stated in the Action plan for follow-up of the 2016 ENQA Review, 7 May 2018,
- [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area](#);
- [Guidelines for external reviews of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA](#);
- [Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies](#).

Given that the legal framework governing ASHE activities and internal regulations did not undergo any fundamental changes and that this is the third ENQA's external review of ASHE, in drafting the first draft of the Self-evaluation we concentrated on the presentation of the improvements made and their impact. In addition to said documents, a number of carried out analyses and feedback from stakeholders gathered in the past four-year period were available to ASHE. Improvements based on the analyses and feedback have been integrated in ASHE's processes. All departments were included in the process of preparation of the SWOT analysis.

In December 2020, ASHE notified the main stakeholders in higher education about the external review of ASHE to be 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, about the scheduled workflow of the procedure including ENQA representatives site visit scheduled for June 2021 and on the Self-evaluation drafting plan.

The appointed team had regular meetings from December 2020 and worked on the Self-evaluation in accordance with the scheduled distribution of tasks, and a group of employees was very actively engaged in the process. In February 2021, the Self-evaluation was submitted to all employees for comments and opinions. A draft Self-evaluation was submitted to all members of ASHE's Management Board and Accreditation Council for comments. 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. The final Self-evaluation was submitted to ENQA in April and published online in May 2021.

3 HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

In accordance with the Bologna system, higher education in the Republic of Croatia has a three-cycle study model, including undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate level of study. Like several other European higher education systems, the Croatian system comprises a professional and university profile of study programmes and institutions (Figure 1). Unlike higher education institutions that run university programmes up to the doctoral level, professional studies are primarily delivered at polytechnics and colleges at two levels – undergraduate and graduate.

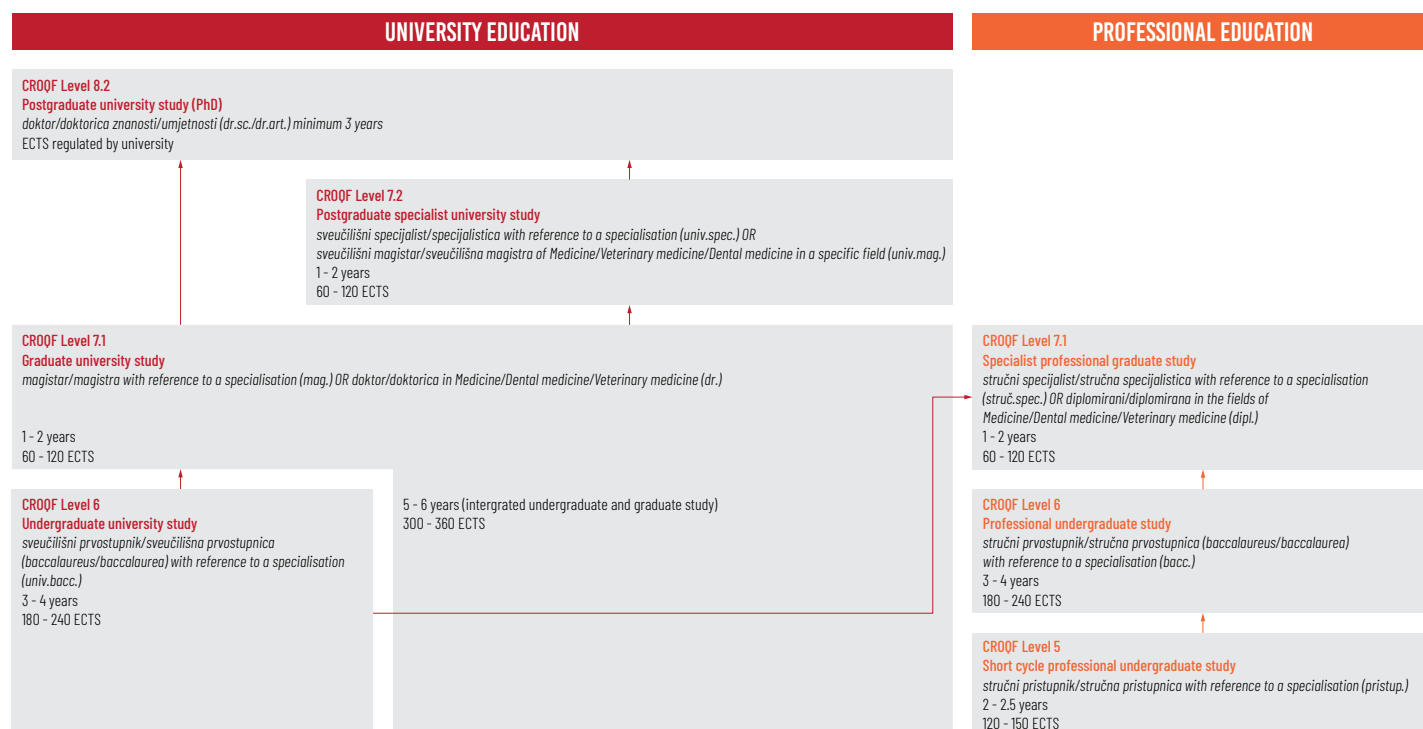


Figure 1 Chart of Higher Education System in Croatia¹

¹All figures, charts and tables contained in this document are provided by the Agency for Science and Higher Education.

THERE ARE CURRENTLY 117 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CROATIA IN WHICH A TOTAL OF 162,928 STUDENTS STUDIED IN THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2018/2019, OUT OF WHICH 133,720 STUDENTS STUDIED IN UNIVERSITIES AND UNIVERSITY CONSTITUENTS; 90% STUDENTS STUDY IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND 10% STUDENTS STUDY IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS.

There are currently 117 higher education institutions in Croatia in which a total of 162,928 students studied in the academic year 2018/2019, out of which 133,720 students studied in universities and university constituents; 90% students study in public higher education institutions and 10% students study in private higher education institutions. Full-time students of public higher education institutions can study free of charge if they collect the required number of ECTS credits, while students of private higher education institutions pay tuition fees. All full-time students are entitled to subsidized student means and accommodation.

Specific characteristics of Croatian higher education that become evident in external evaluation procedures refer to different levels of integration among the universities. The four major Croatian universities (University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek and University of Split) are not fully integrated universities, but have their constituents (faculties and academies) with the status of a legal entity. External evaluation procedures at these

universities are organized at the level of their constituents (faculties), institutions with a large management and financial autonomy, and not at the university level.

Other specific characteristics of Croatian higher education system include the system of higher education and science financing which is mostly (on average above 85%) financed from the state budget as well as the manner of recruitment and promotion of teachers which is regulated at the national level, and not at the level of higher education institutions, as it is in most foreign higher education systems.

The period of the last twenty years has seen major developments in the area of higher education, which have included the reform of study programmes in accordance with the Bologna principles (from 2005 to 2009); establishing of new higher education institutions, public polytechnics and private colleges, as well as increase in establishment of universities; the development of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CroQF) and its alignment with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area – QF-EHEA; the introduction of the State Matura at the end of high-school education; the introduction of a centralized system for applications to study programmes which take into consideration the results of State Matura exams, etc.

Regarding the development of quality assurance, the biggest challenges in higher education for the next period will certainly include the introduction of a more competitive system of financing of higher education and science based on programme contracts, changes in the manner and conditions of teacher advancement in scientific and scientific-teaching grades, higher education institutions management system, continued implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework, etc.

3.2 LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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 and Education. The adopted [Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education](#) (2009, hereinafter: Act, Annex 2) defines internal and external quality assurance system at the national level and activities and establishment of the Agency for Science and Higher Education as a public institution in the Republic of Croatia tasked with quality assurance and improvement in science and higher education. On the other hand, Croatian higher education institutions are responsible for the development of internal quality assurance in accordance with the national legislative framework and the ESG.

Other regulations:

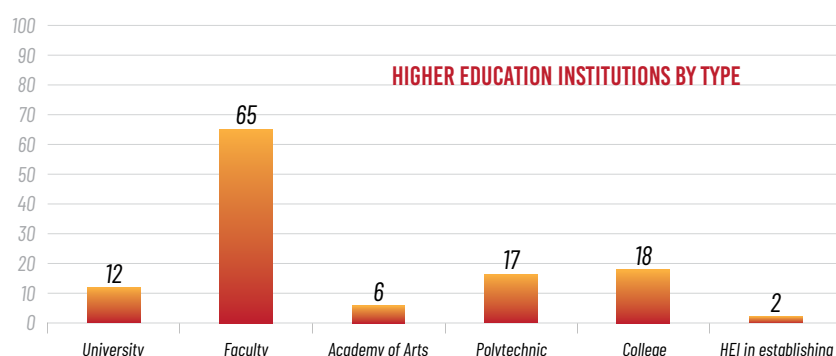
- Act on the Recognition of Foreign Educational Qualifications (OG 158/03, 198/03, 138/06, 45/11),
- Croatian Qualifications Framework Act (OG 22/13, 41/16, 64/18, 47/20, 20/21),
- Act on Academic and Professional Titles and Academic Degree (OG 107/07, 118/12),
- [Ordinance on the Content of a Licence and Conditions for Issuing a Licence for Performing Higher Education Activity, Carrying out a Study Programme and Re-Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions](#) (OG 24/10),
- [Ordinance on Conditions for Issuing a Licence for Scientific Activity, Conditions for Re-accreditation of Scientific Organisations and Content of Licence](#) (OG 83/2010),
- Ordinance on the Croatian Qualifications Framework Register (OG 62/2014),
- Ordinance on the Content, Manner and Procedure of Completion of the National Database of Regulated Professions,
- Rules on Application Conditions and Procedure, Administering Entrance Exams and Ranking Applicants to Study Programmes,
- Rules on Conditions of Enrolment in Graduate Study Programmes.

3.3 INSTITUTIONS IN THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

Higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia include universities (and their constituents - faculties and art academies), polytechnics and colleges. A university is an institution organizing and delivering university study programmes, and, exceptionally, professional study programmes. Polytechnics and colleges deliver professional study programmes. The main difference between polytechnics and colleges is in the number of study programmes they deliver (polytechnics deliver at least three study programmes in three different scientific fields).

In addition to higher education institutions engaged in teaching activity, the system of higher education and science also includes scientific organizations. These are primarily public research institutes that cooperate with higher education institutions to varying degrees. They, like some other public and private scientific organizations, are the subject of external evaluation conducted by ASHE as its regular activity.

The system of higher education and the system of science in the Croatian case are relatively separate in terms of public policies that apply to them, and this separation is reflected in the modalities of quality evaluation. Nevertheless, there are some overlaps, especially in the evaluations of higher education institutions within universities that have both missions - teaching and research.



The higher education system currently includes 117 higher education institutions (Chart 1) with the status of a legal entity: 12 universities (9 public and 3 private universities), 71 faculties and art academies as part of universities, 17 polytechnics (11 public and 6 private polytechnics) and 18 colleges (3 public and 15 private colleges).

Scientific organisations in Croatia include 25 public research institutes, 9 public universities and their constituents, 2 private universities, 3 polytechnics and 6 colleges and 74 other legal entities with a research unit (according to the data from the Register of Scientific Organizations, Ministry of Science and Education, 4 February 2021).

Chart 1. Higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia

3.4 STRUCTURE OF PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFICATIONS

Higher education institutions deliver university or 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, and ensure a direct integration in employment. University study programmes are delivered at the undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels, while professional study programmes are delivered at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The undergraduate level corresponds to level 6 of the Croatian Qualifications Framework, graduate level corresponds to level 7 of the Croatian Qualifications Framework and the postgraduate doctoral level corresponds to level 8 of the Croatian Qualifications Framework.

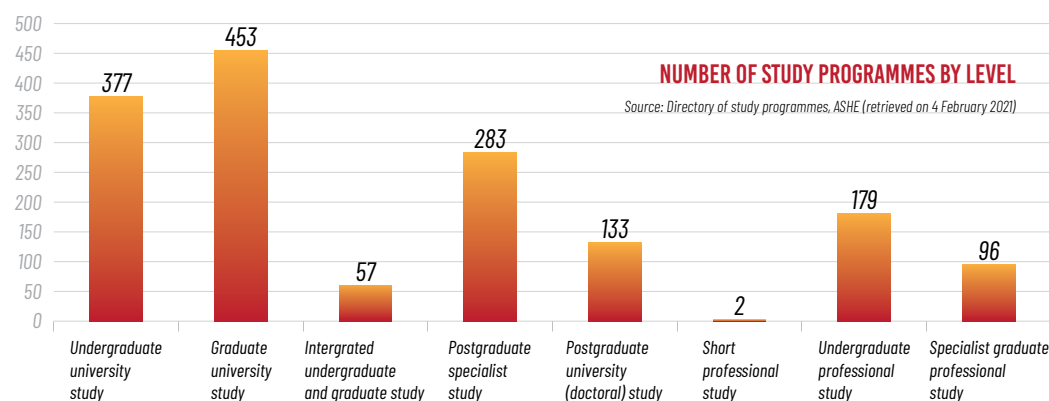


Chart 2. Number of study programmes in the Republic of Croatia, by level

Currently, there are 1580 accredited study programmes in Croatia (according to the data from the Directory of Study Programmes, retrieved on 4 February 2021). They are presented by levels in Chart 2, from which it is evident that the majority of study programmes are delivered at the undergraduate and graduate university levels.

3.4 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF ASHE

The development of a quality assurance system at the national level is linked to the strengthening of ASHE as an independent agency with a central role in it. In addition to having the function of a national accreditation agency, ASHE is the only external evaluation agency in Croatia. Accordingly, the mission defined the purpose of its existence and operation. ASHE's mission is to work with stakeholders to contribute to the continuous development and improvement of quality assurance in higher education and science, with the aim of continuously improving the quality of higher education institutions and scientific organizations and their better international positioning and recognition. In the context of the above-mentioned role of ASHE in quality assurance and in the development and application of external evaluation methodologies in Croatian higher education and science, the proper application of the ESG and membership in ENQA were crucial. The benefits for the national system resulting from a single European approach to quality assurance have resulted in a better integration of the national higher education system into the European one, internationalization of systems and institutions, quality improvements and, ultimately, policy adjustments to facilitate institutional quality improvement.

In the context of internal quality assurance, ASHE's efforts are focused on raising awareness of quality and quality assurance in the system, but also of the quality of the institutions themselves. The adoption of the national quality assurance framework, the external evaluation procedures carried out by ASHE, along with various educational activities intended for higher education institutions, were a strong impetus for the development of internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions and fostering the importance of quality assurance in higher education.

IN ORDER TO FACILITATE THE DEVELOPMENT AND ENABLE THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM FOR ALL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, ASHE ENCOURAGED THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONAL NETWORK OF QUALITY ASSURANCE UNITS AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (CROQANET)

Units of internal quality assurance have been established at Croatian higher education institutions, and commissions, committees or quality centers have been established in which representatives of teachers, administrative and technical staff, students and industry representatives cooperate. Documents regulating the internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution and its relationship with external quality assurance have been adopted, however, the conducted external evaluation procedures show that there is still a lot of room for improvement and development. In order to facilitate the development and enable the improvement of the

internal quality assurance system for all higher education institutions, ASHE encouraged the establishment of a national network of quality assurance units at higher education institutions (CroQAnet), with the aim of providing professional support, fostering networking, sharing experiences and promoting good practice in quality assurance in higher education at the national and international level.

4 HISTORY, PROFILE AND ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY

4.1 BEGINNING OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN CROATIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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 strategic body in charge of the development of higher education. 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.

The Agency for Science and Higher Education was established in 2005 which, in accordance with the legal framework that was in force at the time, provided expert and administrative support to the National Council for Higher Education in the implementation of external evaluation in higher education. Evaluation of all study programmes in Croatia harmonized with Bologna principles was carried out from 2005 to 2009. In that period the evaluation of all higher education institutions in Croatia started, and 21 higher education institutions had undergone evaluation up to the moment the legislative changes were enacted in 2009.

According to the Act, in 2009 the Agency for Science and Higher Education became the only national public body responsible for carrying out independent external evaluation in higher education and science. The National Council for Higher Edu-

cation (now called the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development, NCSHETD) became the top strategic and expert body in charge of development of the system of higher education, science and technological development.

4.2 ASHE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

ASHE bodies are the Management Board, Director, the Accreditation Council, Follow-up Committee and Complaints Committee.

The Management Board manages the work of ASHE and supervises its operations. ASHE Management Board consists of a chair and eight members appointed for a four-year term. Candidates are proposed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the Rectors' Conference, the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development and the Croatian Student Council. Chair of the Board and seven of its members are appointed by the Croatian Parliament, while ASHE appoints one member of the Management Board from the ranks of its employees. The Board adopts the [Statute of the Agency](#) (Annex 3) upon a proposal of the Director and, with the consent of the Ministry, appoints and discharges the Director and Assistant Director of the Agency; adopts the 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, and monitors its implementation. Furthermore, the Management Board adopts the annual budget of the Agency following the proposal of the Director, adopts the financial report and the annual report on the Agency's activities.

ASHE's 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, decides on the start and end of employment of ASHE employees, participates in the activities of the Management Board and the Accreditation Council without a right to make decisions and selects external collaborators from the rank of scientists and experts for performing particular tasks concerning ASHE activities and operations. ASHE Director is appointed following a public competition announced by the Management Board. To be appointed ASHE Director, a person must have a doctoral degree (PhD) and be appointed into the scientific-teaching grade of associate professor or full professor, or, respectively, into the grade of a senior research associate or a scientific adviser.

The Management Board of the Agency appoints and discharges the Director of the Agency. Prof. Jasmina Havranek, PhD, performs the function of acting director of ASHE.

ACCREDITATION COUNCIL IS AN EXPERT COUNCIL OF THE AGENCY THAT ADOPTS DOCUMENTS RELATED TO EXTERNAL EVALUATION PROCEDURES AND FINAL OPINIONS ON THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, SCIENTIFIC ORGANISATIONS AND STUDY PROGRAMMES.

Accreditation Council is an expert council of the Agency that adopts documents related to external evaluation procedures and final opinions on the quality of higher education institutions, scientific organisations and study programmes.

The Accreditation Council adopts documents necessary for external evaluation procedures in higher education and science; it adopts 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; adopts action plans and reports on the implementation of action plans in the follow-up procedures and opinions of the Complaints Committee. AC members have expert knowledge of international, especially European and national quality assurance system, and are obligated to undergo continuous professional development in that area. AC has 11 permanent members appointed for a four-year term of office by the Management Board. The members of the Council are nominated by the following bodies: the Rectors' Conference, Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, Croatian Chamber of Economy, Croatian Student Council, National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development and research institutes, as well as academics through a public call. Associate members are appointed by the Accreditation Council decision upon the proposal of the Director and have no voting rights. The Accreditation Council has two associate members, one of which is from abroad (Slovenia).

The Follow-up Committee is a body of the Accreditation Council that proposes to the AC the approval of the submitted action plans and reports on the implementation of action plans in the follow-up phase of external evaluation procedures. Members of the Follow-up Committee are appointed by the Accreditation Council, and one member, who is also the President of the Committee, is appointed from the ranks of the AC members.

The Complaints Committee is an expert body of ASHE whose task is to decide on written complaints that higher education institutions can submit in the process of initial accreditation, re-accreditation and audit, within 15 days of receiving the opinion of the Accreditation Council. The Committee has three members and alternate members. They are appointed by the Management Board for a period of three years at the proposal of the Rectors' Conference and Council of Polytechnics and Colleges. Complaints Committee members are independent in their work, do not represent their respective institutions and must not be in a conflict of interest.

ASHE's organizational structure is presented in Figure 2.

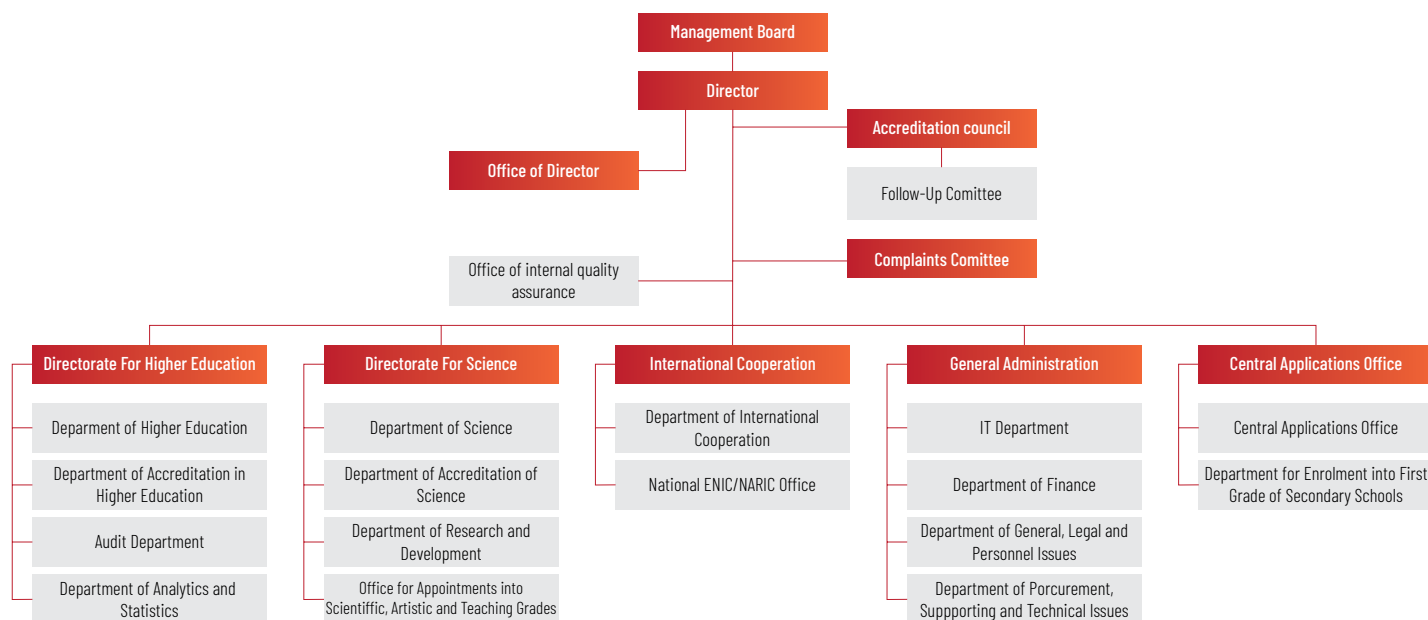


Figure 2 ASHE Organisational Chart

4.3 ASHE ACTIVITIES

The Agency is responsible for carrying out and improvement of external quality assurance procedures in science and higher education (Figure 3), which directly influences the development of internal quality assurance of higher education institutions and scientific organizations. The Agency also carries out other activities within its scope of work in accordance with the Act, with the aim of quality improvement and development of higher education and science system in Croatia, which are an added value to the Agency. The network of activities enables the Agency to be involved and have insight into various aspects of the higher education system, their better understanding and better contextualization of the quality assurance processes. Other activities are systematized below, while part of the activities aimed at international cooperation is explained in Chapter 8.

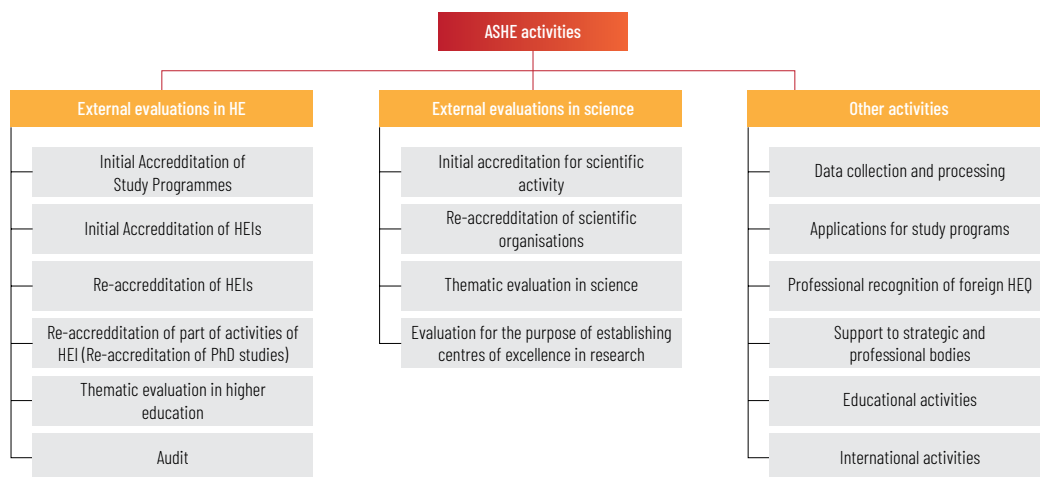


Figure 3 Activities of the Agency for Science and Higher Education

1) EVALUATION PROCEDURES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

External evaluation procedures in higher education are explained in Chapter 5.

2) EVALUATION PROCEDURES IN SCIENCE

ASHE carries out the following external evaluation procedures in science:

- Initial accreditation for issuing a licence for performing scientific activity,
- Re-accreditation of scientific organisations,
- Thematic evaluation in science,
- Evaluation of scientific quality for the purpose of establishing scientific centres of excellence.

Where possible, ESG was used in the development of methodologies for external evaluation in science, along with examples of good international practice. All procedures of external evaluation in science involve the participation of an expert panel (peer-review), a self-evaluation document of the institution and an expert panel report.

2.1 Initial accreditation for obtaining a licence to perform scientific activity is a procedure that all scientific organizations wishing to perform scientific activity must undergo (licence for performing scientific activity is a precondition for project application and funding of research with public funds). The initial accreditation procedure includes the appointment of an expert panel, a site visit to a scientific organization and a final report, a recommendation from the Agency's Accreditation Council and a positive or negative decision adopted by the Ministry. Outcomes of initial accreditation procedures are published on the Agency's website, and they include an expert panel report, a statement of the scientific organization regarding the report, the accreditation recommendation and the decision of the Ministry. Based on the initial accreditation, a scientific organization is entered in the Register of Scientific Organizations kept by the Ministry.

2.2 Re-accreditation of scientific organization is an external evaluation of quality aimed at improving the quality of scientific activity. Re-accreditation of scientific organizations in the higher education system is carried out as part of re-accreditation of higher education institutions. Re-accreditation of scientific organizations outside the higher education system and re-accreditation of public research institutes includes the drafting of the self-evaluation report, a site visit by an expert panel (peer review), the final report, an accreditation recommendation and a decision issued by the minister in charge of higher education and science.

2.3 Thematic evaluation in science is carried out by the Agency on the basis of a decision adopted by the Accreditation Council. It can also be carried out at the proposal of the minister, the subject of evaluation or the student council of the higher education institution. The outcome of a thematic evaluation is an expert panel (peer-review) report on a specific evaluation topic.

2.4 Scientific centres of excellence are established for a period of five years and they bring together the best scientists in a particular area at a national level. Focused on contemporary research topics, they represent an internationally competitive and recognizable research group in terms of quality and scope of their scientific production and capability for effective international cooperation and significant contribution to the development of science, higher education and economy at the national level. A scientific organisation, part of a scientific organisation or a group of scientists are proclaimed as a scientific centre of excellence by the minister at a proposal of the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development, with a consent of a nominated scientific organisation or a group of scientists, based on the evaluation procedure in line with the relevant legislation on quality assurance in science and higher education, and the procedure that necessarily includes an international evaluation.

3) COLLECTING AND PROCESSING DATA ON THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

The Agency collects and processes information about the systems of science, higher education and other systems interdependent with science and higher education. Data are collected through evaluation procedures or retrieved from the Central Bureau of Statistics and processed for the needs of the Agency, and are used as a basis for evaluation procedures, for the preparation of overviews and thematic analyses (more information on thematic analyses in Chapter 9.4). The Agency maintains several information systems used for data collection in evaluation procedures (MOZVAG) and regularly updates the [Directory of Accredited Study Programmes in the Republic of Croatia](#) and the [Directory of Study Programmes conducted in Croatia in foreign languages](#).

4) ACTIVITIES RELATED TO APPLICATIONS AND FULFILMENT OF CONDITIONS FOR ENROLMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The Agency incorporates the [Central Applications Office](#) – the national centre for administering applications to study programmes in Croatia. The CAO performs activities related to applications to undergraduate study programmes, integrated undergraduate and graduate study programmes, and graduate study programmes.

The central system of applications to higher education institutions was introduced in 2010, which ensured a fully online and transparent manner of submitting applications to higher education institutions, and the Agency became responsible for said activities. The Office is also responsible for applications to high schools submitted by candidates from outside the regular Croatian education system. Through the Central Applications Office the Agency also covers a number of other activities: analyses of enrolments in study programmes, monitoring graduate employment, student satisfaction surveys, surveys of high school pupils' needs for adequate information about the system and enrolment in higher education institutions. Through these activities the Agency gains insight into the topic of enrolment quotas and the need for a better alignment of higher education and labour market, as well as the need for better informing of prospective students. In the past five years the Agency has published instructional videos ([FAKSiranje](#), [Tibiraš \(You choose\)](#), [Zašto studirati u Hrvatskoj \(Why study in Croatia?\)](#)) and publications (more information in Chapter 9.4.) aimed at providing future students with information about enrolment in HEIs and about the importance of accreditation. The Agency

THE CENTRAL SYSTEM OF APPLICATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS WAS INTRODUCED IN 2010, WHICH ENSURED A FULLY ONLINE AND TRANSPARENT MANNER OF SUBMITTING APPLICATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, AND THE AGENCY BECAME RESPONSIBLE FOR SAID ACTIVITIES.



strategically decided to take over the monitoring of graduate employability, which proved to be one of the weaknesses of the higher education system during the first cycle of re-accreditation. As part of this commitment, ASHE is involved in the EU-funded international project Eurograduate.

5) RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

One of ASHE's activities is also the professional recognition of foreign higher education qualifications for the purpose of employment in Croatia and the provision of information on national and foreign education systems ([National ENIC/NARIC Office](#)). The National ENIC/NARIC Office carries out a number of activities aimed at supporting the strategic goals of encouraging international mobility in Europe and beyond, while also contributing to the development of quality assurance platforms for all levels of education. The quality of work of the Croatian ENIC/NARIC Office is confirmed by numerous invitations it receives to participate in international projects and consultations.

6) EXPERT AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT TO STRATEGIC AND EXPERT BODIES IN SCIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

ASHE provides administrative support by organizing sessions, sending out invitations, drafting minutes, decisions, opinions, etc. as well as professional support regarding legislative issues and quality assurance issues to the following bodies:

- National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development (strategic body) and its bodies: scientific area councils (7) and scientific field committees (23),
- Council of Polytechnics and Colleges and its field committees (7),
- Committee for ethics in science and higher education.

The Agency organizes around 150 sessions of said bodies annually.

7) EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

ASHE additionally strengthened the educational activities it provides to higher education institutions (workshops, seminars, conferences and webinars) through the implementation of the EU-funded project "[Improvement of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Systems at Higher Education Institutions \(SKAZVO\)](#)" (more information in Chapter 8). One of the goals of the project is enhancing the systems of internal quality assurance of Croatian higher education institutions. The implementation of external evaluations identified some weaknesses at the system level, as well as the needs of higher education institutions, and accordingly workshops were organized on the topics of career counselling at higher education institutions, development of study programmes based on learning outcomes, strengthening internal quality assurance systems, ESG training, internationalization of higher education, the role of students in quality assurance, e-learning, study experience during the coronavirus pandemic, etc. Educational activities were very well received among representatives of higher education institutions and students (more than 1700 members of these target groups participated), and positive feedback was collected from participants (more information in Chapter 11).

5 QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION CARRIED OUT BY THE AGENCY

According to the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education, ASHE is responsible for carrying out initial accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes, re-accreditation of higher education institutions and re-accreditation of part of activities of higher education institutions (re-accreditation of post-graduate university i.e. doctoral study programmes), thematic evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes and audit (Table 1).

Procedure	Number of procedures carried out from 2017 to 2021
Initial accreditation for delivering a study programme	53
Initial accreditation for performing higher education activities	4
Re-accreditation of higher education institutions	55
Re-accreditation of doctoral studies	114
Thematic evaluation	—
Audit	8

Table 1 Procedures of external quality assurance in science and higher education

During the last five years the Agency carried out initial accreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions; in 2017 it started the implementation of the second cycle of re-accreditation and the second cycle of audit; re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes started in 2016 and ended in 2019, while thematic evaluation was not conducted in the said period because no applications were submitted.

1) INITIAL ACCREDITATION

is a procedure of external evaluation of the quality of new higher education institutions and/or new study programmes. The aim of this procedure is to ensure that a new higher education institution can start operating if it meets the required standards, or if the new study programme meets the required standards, the higher education institution can start its delivery.

The Agency carries out the following procedures:

1a. Initial accreditation for carrying out a study programme which is carried out at private higher education institutions, public colleges and polytechnics. The enhanced initial accreditation model was developed in 2020 and it assesses compliance with the conditions necessary for issuing a licence for a new study programme, as well as fulfilment of elements to be prescribed by the qualification standard. In other words, a single procedure is carried out which includes both the procedure for issuing a licence for a new study programme and the procedure of adjusting the study programme with qualifications standard adopted. Public universities and their constituents do not undergo the procedure, but in that case the new study programmes are approved by the university senates, which is preceded by an internal evaluation at the university. The Agency checks whether these programmes are in compliance with the strategic document "Network of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes in the Republic of Croatia", which contains the priorities on which the establishment of new public higher education institutions and study programmes should be based. For these study programmes, the Agency issues an opinion on the justification of public funding to the Ministry for Science and Higher Education.

1b. Initial accreditation for performing higher education activities which all new higher education institutions which are being established undergo.

In the past five years ASHE carried out initial accreditation of 53 study programmes, of which 43 were granted a licence, while 10 programmes were denied a licence. The Agency also conducted four initial accreditation procedures for performing higher education activities.

2) RE-ACCREDITATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IS A MANDATORY

external evaluation procedure for all higher education institutions, which assesses the fulfilment of the necessary conditions (academic threshold) in addition to the assessment of quality of a higher education institution against the defined quality standards. It is carried out in five-year cycles.

The purpose of the procedure is to encourage further development of quality in the main aspects of work of higher education institutions and to ensure that students study at higher education institutions/study programmes that meet the necessary requirements.

The first cycle of re-accreditation began in 2010 and was completed in 2016 with the following outcomes: issuing of a licence was recommended for 76 higher education institutions, letters of expectation for 51 higher education institutions, while a denial of a licence was recommended for 4 higher education institutions and 28 study programmes.

The second cycle started in December 2017 and it was carried out based on the improved model. The new model was based on 2015 ESG, and it included improvements recommended in ENQA's external review from 2017 and adopted standards for the evaluation of quality of universities and their constituents, as well as of polytechnics and colleges. The second cycle focused on the evaluation of improvements made by higher education institutions based on recommendations for quality improvement issued during the first cycle and the fulfilment of the re-accreditation standards. The outcome of the procedure (issuing of licence, letter of expectation or denial of licence) depends on the overall quality assessment.

In the second cycle of re-accreditation from 2017 to the end of 2020 the re-accreditation procedure was completed for 55 higher education institutions, 23 of which were issued a confirmation and 32 received a letter of expectation.

With regard to the circumstances caused by COVID-19 pandemic, and with the aim of ensuring the continuity of its activities, in September 2020 the Agency published the [Decision on the method of implementing external evaluation procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), based on which all external evaluation procedures are carried out. According to the Decision, if the preconditions for carrying out re-accreditation in a standard manner (on site) are not met, the re-accreditation procedure can be carried out; by applying a hybrid (mixed) model, which is a combination of on-site and online re-accreditation; the procedure can also be fully carried out online or it can be postponed.

3) RE-ACCREDITATION OF DOCTORAL STUDY PROGRAMMES

is a procedure of external evaluation of the quality of all postgraduate university (doctoral) study programmes, which evaluates the degree of fulfilment of the necessary criteria.

The aim of this procedure is to ensure delivery of only those doctoral study programmes which meet the necessary quality level and to issue recommendations for improvement.

The re-accreditation of doctoral studies was prompted by the findings of the thematic evaluation of doctoral studies launched in 2012, which identified certain weaknesses in doctoral education, after which the competent ministry requested re-accreditation.

The same methodology and regulations are used as in the re-accreditation of higher education institutions, and quality criteria have been developed and adjusted that combine the ESG and quality assessment of scientific research. Representatives of all public universities were involved in the development of the criteria - vice-rectors for science, i.e. other university representatives in charge of the quality of doctoral studies, as well as representatives of public research institutes, associations of doctoral candidates and the competent ministry.

PHD re-accreditation started in 2016 and ended in 2019, resulting in the evaluation of 114 doctoral study programmes.

For 51 doctoral study programmes, the Agency recommended the issuance of a licence on fulfilment of conditions for carrying out part of activities (issuance of a licence). Of these, 11 doctoral study programmes received the high quality label. The Agency recommended issuance of a letter of expectation for a certain period, in which the doctoral programmes were supposed to eliminate the deficiencies identified by the expert panels, for 63 doctoral study programmes. Out of that, 7 doctoral study programmes received a ban on student enrolment in addition to a letter of expectation.

Based on the plans adopted during the re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes, 18 programmes were not re-accredited because the institutions themselves decided to terminate them following the announcement of re-accreditation.

4) THEMATIC EVALUATION

evaluates a particular aspect of a higher education institution or the system of higher education.

Its purpose is the improvement of the evaluated segment of operations of a higher education institution.

It is carried out by the Agency upon a request of the minister responsible for science and higher education or the subject of evaluation (for example, a higher education institution). In accordance with the specific goal of thematic evaluation, the procedure and the corresponding standards are adopted.

The outcome of the evaluation is the Expert Panel's report published on ASHE's website. According to the law thematic evaluation can serve as a basis for launching a re-accreditation procedure (as it was in the case of doctoral study programmes). In the past five years there were not any requests submitted for initiating thematic evaluation procedures.

5) AUDIT

is an external evaluation procedure that evaluates the functionality, effectiveness and coherence of established internal quality assurance system (QAS) at a higher education institution.

Its purpose is to encourage higher education institutions to develop an effective internal quality assurance system that provides continuous support to the improvements and development of higher education institutions.

Audit is carried out in five-year cycles according to the Act, Ordinance on Audit, Audit Manual and the ESG. The first cycle started in 2010 and ended in 2016 and it included public universities and polytechnics.

Based on the gathered experience and feedback from stakeholders a new procedure was developed which has been applied since 2018. According to the decision of the Accreditation Council, the procedure will be conducted at colleges (so far 8 higher education institutions have undergone audit) and in addition to the procedures carried out in the first cycle they will result in a comprehensive overview of the functionality and effectiveness of established quality systems at the national level.

An additional emphasis was placed on a process-based approach to quality assurance i.e. on assessing whether a HEI's processes follow quality assurance cycle based on PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act).

The outcome of the procedure is the final report containing the assessment of the degree of development and efficiency of the institutional quality assurance system and recommendations for improvement. If the evaluated QAS is in the developed stage or higher by each individual element of evaluation, the Agency issues a certificate to the HEI. In the first audit cycle, out of 39 audited higher education institutions a certificate was issued to 17 higher education institutions, while in the second audit cycle, out of 8 audited higher education institutions a certificate was issued to 5 higher education institutions.

6) CROSS-BORDER ACTIVITIES

One of the strategic goals of the Agency is intensify external evaluations abroad. Following this goal, the re-accreditation procedure of the University of Mostar was completed in 2017 and the final report is available on the Agency's website. The main reason for launching this procedure lies in the fact that the University of Mostar is largely funded by the Republic of Croatia, it is the only university in Bosnia and Herzegovina whose programmes are delivered in the Croatian language, and the majority of students of that university come from Croatia and are later employed in Croatia. Therefore, the purpose of the conducted re-accreditation was to encourage further quality improvement of the university.

At the request of the private higher education institution International School for Social and Business Studies (ISSBS) from Slovenia, audit was conducted at that higher education institution in 2016. The report was published on ASHE's website, and the university was awarded a certificate for a period of five years. In February 2021, the ISSBS expressed interest in renewing the certificate, i.e. for conducting a new audit.

In the past period, the Agency received several expressions of interest from foreign higher education institutions for the Agency's accreditation. In February 2021, an agreement was signed with the Ukrainian Interregional Academy of Personnel Management in Kiev on the accreditation of seven study programmes.

Moreover, in the past period, the conditions were met at the national level for the implementation of accreditation of joint studies in accordance with the European approach to quality assurance of joint studies. Based on the requirements from 2021, the accreditation of a joint graduate study is underway, which is proposed by a Croatian and a French higher education institution.

Moreover, the French agency HCERES informed the Agency that it was conducting the accreditation of a joint study programme in the implementation of which a Croatian university also participates, and asked the Agency to propose prospective expert panel members.

6 PROCESSES AND THEIR METHODOLOGIES

All external quality assurance procedures carried out by ASHE share some common characteristics, but as the processes differ in scope, goals and methodologies, there are certain differences in their outcomes and implementation, as well. Procedures and steps of each type of external evaluation are available on ASHE's website along with detailed information. Basic processes and principles of external evaluation procedures do not differ significantly. Higher education institutions prepare an input document for evaluation – self-evaluation report for the re-accreditation procedure, feasibility study of the study programme for the initial accreditation procedure, internal audit report in the audit procedure or they submit the data necessary for the thematic evaluation. All procedures are based on peer-review, including the site visit and publicly available final report published on ASHE's website and the possibility of lodging a complaint or appeal. They differ according to the schedule of certain phases of the evaluation process, forms and the legal effect of the final reports, as well as the scope and focus of evaluation. Below is an overview of processes and methodologies for each external evaluation procedure.

6.1 RE-ACCREDITATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

EVALUATION AREA

Re-accreditation is performed to assess the necessary conditions and the quality of higher education institutions against the agreed quality standards and, based on that, to issue recommendations for improvement.

The evaluation procedure includes the assessments of the expert panel on a four-level scale according to pre-defined standards, divided into five assessment areas of institutional activity:

- Internal quality assurance and the social role of the higher education institution,
- Study programmes,
- Teaching process and student support,
- Teaching and institutional capacities,
- Scientific/artistic activity.

START OF THE PROCEDURE AND INPUT DOCUMENTS

The evaluation dynamics (Figure 4) is based on the re-accreditation plan for the next academic year. The self-evaluation report of a higher education institution is drafted in accordance with the Standards for the evaluation of quality and it should contain clear, consistent and verifiable information. Analytic supplement, i.e. data attached to the self-evaluation report, are entered in the electronic system MOZVAG generating tables with quantitative data on a higher education institution.

APPOINTING AN EXPERT PANEL AND A SITE VISIT

The evaluation of a higher education institution is carried out by an expert panel chaired by a president. It consists of five members, including a student, and exceptionally, a larger number of members of the expert panel may be appointed. Before visiting a higher education institution, members of an expert panel participate in a training workshop, while the site visit of an expert panel to a higher education institution can last from two to three days.

FINAL REPORT

The final report comprises general information about a higher education institution, an analysis of fulfilment of each standard within five assessment areas, a detailed overview of each of the five assessment areas, examples of good practice, an analysis of advantages and disadvantages of a higher education institution and recommendations for improvement. The report is then sent to the higher education institution for comments. The expert panel report and statement from the higher education institution inform the Accreditation Council's decision.

ACCREDITATION OPINION

Based on the carried out re-accreditation procedure, the expert panel's final report and the official statement/comments of the higher education institution (if submitted), the Accreditation Council issues an opinion on:

- Issuing a confirmation on the fulfilment of conditions,
- Denial of a licence,
- Issuing a letter of expectation with a deadline for resolving deficiencies of up to three years (AC sets the time limit for eliminating deficiencies).

ACCREDITATION RECOMMENDATION

Following the re-accreditation procedure and based on a prior opinion of the Accreditation Council, the Agency shall provide an accreditation recommendation to the minister to:

- Issue a confirmation on the fulfilment of conditions.
- Issue a letter of expectation with the time frame for resolving deficiencies of up to three years.
- Denial of a licence.

The accreditation recommendation also includes a quality grade of a higher education institution, and recommendations for quality improvement. The Ministry adopts the final decision on accreditation.

FOLLOW-UP

There are two types of follow-up procedures, depending on the outcome of the procedure.

In the case the confirmation is issued, the higher education institution submits an action plan within six months, and after two years it submits a report on the implementation which is reviewed by the Follow-up Committee. The Committee submits its report to the Accreditation Council.

In case a letter of expectation is issued to a higher education institution, it submits an action plan within a time frame of six months. The report on the implementation of an action plan is submitted every year, and the report on eliminated deficiencies is submitted before the expiry of the letter of expectation. The action plan and the report on the implementation of an action plan are reviewed by the Accreditation Council.

COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

The opinion of the Accreditation Council is submitted to the higher education institution which can submit a complaint to the Complaints Committee. The Committee's opinion shall be submitted to the Accreditation Council.

INFORMING ABOUT THE PROCEDURE AND THE LEGAL EFFECT OF THE PROCEDURE

The final expert panel report in Croatian and English, an official statement of a higher education institution on the final report, and the accreditation recommendation of the Agency are public documents, and they are published on the Agency's website.

After the end of the re-accreditation procedure, the Agency gathers feedback from a higher education institution and members of an expert panel. The data is collected for the purpose of improving the work of the Agency.

The Agency maintains the Directory of study programmes delivered by higher education institutions in Croatian and English and updates the information in the Directory of study programmes on the Agency's website in accordance with the outcome of re-accreditation of a higher education institution. The information about outcomes of re-accreditation is also updated in the DEQAR database.

The Agency performs annual analyses of outcomes of re-accreditation of higher education institutions by scientific areas, and compiles a comprehensive analysis of all carried out re-accreditation procedures at the end of the cycle.

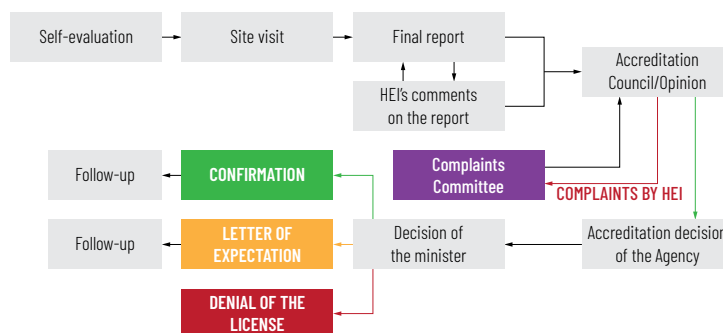


Figure 4 Workflow of re-accreditation of a higher education institution

6.2 INITIAL ACCREDITATION FOR DELIVERING A STUDY PROGRAMME

EVALUATION AREA

Initial accreditation includes assessment of compliance with the necessary quality standards required for the implementation of a study programme, including dislocated, online, joint and collaborative study programmes and programmes delivered in a foreign language. All study programmes carried out by private higher education institutions, public polytechnics and colleges, except study programmes delivered by public universities, are subject to initial accreditation of a study programme.

The evaluation includes expert panel grades according to a three-point scale and pre-defined standards divided into four assessment areas:

- Learning outcomes,
- Study programmes,
- Teaching process and student support,
- Resources.

START OF THE PROCEDURE AND INPUT DOCUMENTS

Unlike re-accreditation, which takes place according to a pre-established plan adopted by the Accreditation Council, the request for initial accreditation (Figure 5) is submitted to the Ministry of Science and Education, which then forwards it to the Agency. It contains the Feasibility Study on the study programme, evidence of adequate space and equipment, the appropriate number of concluded employment contracts with scientific-teaching or teaching staff and evidence of the necessary funds provided for the performance of activities.

APPOINTING AN EXPERT PANEL AND A SITE VISIT

The evaluation of a higher education institution is carried out by an expert panel chaired by a president. An expert panel comprises at least three members, one of whom is a student. The HEI has the right to issue a statement and object to the composition of the expert panel.

The site visit of an expert panel to a higher education institution can last from one to three days, and before visiting the higher education institution, members of an expert panel participate in a training workshop.

FINAL REPORT

The final report contains a joint grade for each standard, i.e. topic, with recommendations for improvements and a final recommendation for the entire study programme. The expert panel report is the basis for the opinion of the Accreditation Council. Before issuing their final recommendation, an expert panel may ask for programme amendments.

OPINION OF THE ACCREDITATION COUNCIL

There are two possible outcomes of initial accreditation of a study programme:

- Issuing a licence for delivering the proposed study programme;
- Denying a licence for delivering the proposed study programme.

ASHE RECOMMENDATION

On the basis of the conducted procedure, and with the prior opinion of the Accreditation Council, the Agency issues the following accreditation recommendation to the minister for higher education and science:

- Issuing a licence for the implementation of a proposed study programme.
- Denying a licence for delivering the proposed study programme.

FOLLOW-UP

Based on the recommendations from the expert panel report, the higher education institution submits an action plan within a time frame of six months. The higher education institution submits a report on the implementation of an action plan every year until the first generation of students enrolled in the study programme graduates.

COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

The opinion of the Accreditation Council is submitted to the higher education institution which can submit a complaint due to violations of accreditation regulations. The complaint is settled by the Complaints Committee. The Committee's opinion is submitted to the Accreditation Council.

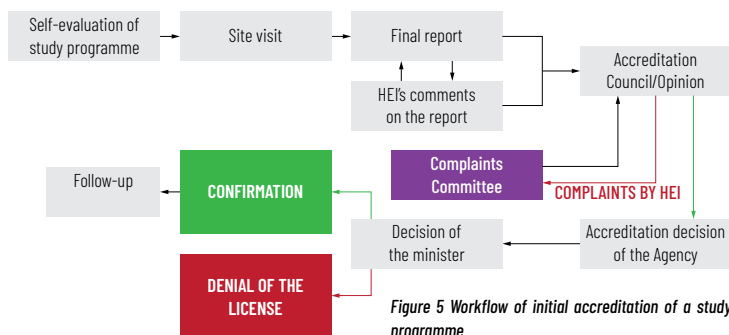


Figure 5 Workflow of initial accreditation of a study programme

INFORMING ABOUT THE PROCEDURE AND THE LEGAL EFFECT OF THE PROCEDURE

The final report of an expert panel, an official statement of a higher education institution on the final report, and the accreditation recommendation of the Agency are public documents, published on the Agency's website.

After the end of the procedure, the Agency gathers feedback from a higher education institution and members of an expert panel for the purpose of improving Agency's activities. The Agency updates the information in the Directory of study programmes on ASHE's website in accordance with the outcome of initial accreditation of a study programme. The information about outcomes of initial accreditation is also updated in the DEQAR database.

6.3 AUDIT

EVALUATION AREA

Audit evaluates whether a quality assurance system (QAS) of a higher education institution is effective and developed. The aim of audit is to assess whether a HEI's QAS is fit for purpose and coherent, and whether it adequately supports institutional mission and overall development of a higher education institution and all HEI's activities. The purpose of audit is to stimulate a continuous development of internal quality assurance systems and quality culture. The evaluation includes the grades of the expert panel on a three-point scale according to the elements of evaluation:

- Quality policy,
- Planning and management,
- Implementation and monitoring,
- Evaluation,
- Improvements, innovations, impact.

START OF THE PROCEDURE AND INPUT DOCUMENTS

Audit (Figure 6) is carried out in accordance with the annual plan determined by ASHE's Accreditation Council published on ASHE's website. Audit can also be carried out upon a proposal of a higher education institution. The higher education institution submits their documentation, which includes the latest internal audit report on the quality assurance system of the higher education institution, while the assessment of the materials submitted by a higher education institution is carried out by an expert panel.

APPOINTING AN EXPERT PANEL AND A SITE VISIT

Audit of a higher education institution is carried out by an expert panel composed of five members and chaired by a president. In addition to foreign and Croatian professors, the panel also comprises a student and a business representative. The HEI has the right to issue a statement and object to the composition of the expert panel. All panel members are required to take part in a training workshop.

The materials submitted by a higher education institution are reviewed, followed by a site visit to the higher education institution, collection of additional evidence, analysis of the collected data and preparation of a draft report. The site visit to a higher education institution can last from two to three days, and exceptionally even longer, according to a previously determined site visit protocol.

FINAL REPORT

The final report contains general information about the higher education institution, structure, history and development of its IQAS, an overview of each of the five assessment areas, examples of good practice, an analysis of advantages and disadvantages of HEIs' IQAS, recommendations for improvements for the follow-up phase and the assessment of development and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system. The final report is then sent to the higher education institution for comments/statement.

CONCLUSION OF THE ACCREDITATION COUNCIL

The final report is submitted to the Accreditation Council for adoption. If the expert panel determines during the audit procedure that the internal quality assurance system of the higher education institution is in the developed phase or higher by all Agency's criteria, the Agency shall, upon adoption of the final report, issue a certificate containing the rating of the development of the internal quality assurance system to the higher education institution for a period of five years.

FOLLOW-UP

The higher education institution drafts a 2-year action plan of improvements. The follow-up phase lasts 6 months from the date the final report is adopted. The evaluated HEI submits the follow-up report to the Agency. The Agency submits the follow-up report to the panel; the panel agrees on and finalizes the conclusion on the effectiveness of activities carried out during the follow-up phase.

A member of the panel and the Agency's coordinator hold a meeting with representatives of the audited higher education institution, where the realization of the action plan of the higher education institution and the conclusions of the panel are presented.

Two years from the date of the adoption of the final report, the audited higher education institution submits to the Agency a report on the implementation of the two-year action plan.

COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

If a higher education institution finds that the expert panel did not conduct the audit procedure in accordance with the Audit Manual and the Audit Ordinance, or is not satisfied with the audit outcome, it may lodge a complaint. New facts and new evidence that were not presented until the end of the site visit cannot be presented in the complaint. Complaints are reviewed by the Agency's Complaints Committee which submits a written opinion to the Accreditation Council. The AC considers the opinion of the Complaints Committee and decides on the adoption of the final report.

INFORMING ABOUT THE PROCEDURE AND LEGAL EFFECT OF THE PROCEDURE

The adopted final report is published on the Agency's website in Croatian, and depending on the type of audit and/or profile of the audited higher education institution – a summary of the final report or the complete final report is published in English. In addition to the final report, the statement of the higher education institution on the final report, the conclusion of the Accreditation Council, the certificate (if awarded), and the conclusion of the expert panel on the follow-up phase are published on ASHE's website.

Every year, the Agency prepares an annual meta-evaluation and publishes it on its website, in which data on the implemented procedures are consolidated and analysed, and at the end of the cycle, a meta-evaluation of the entire audit cycle is prepared.

The Agency organizes joint workshops within the Network of Quality Assurance Units at Croatian Higher Education Institutions (CroQAnet), at which the audited higher education institutions present the results of activities undertaken following the panel recommendations. The information about outcomes of audit is also updated in the DEQAR database.

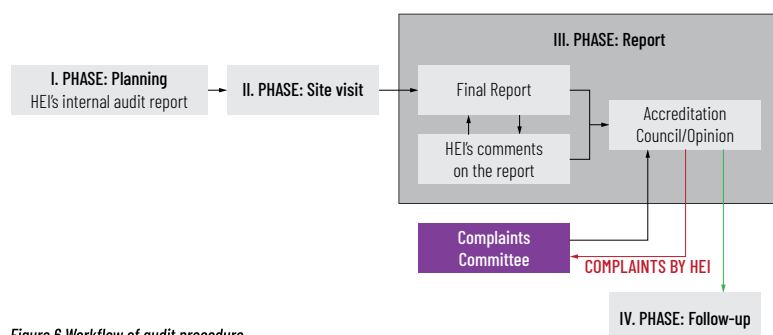


Figure 6 Workflow of audit procedure

6.4 RE-ACCREDITATION OF DOCTORAL STUDIES

EVALUATION AREA

Re-accreditation of doctoral studies is the evaluation of part of activities of higher education institutions. The goal of the procedures is to issue a licence to doctoral study programmes that meet existing legal requirements, to provide higher education institutions with an insight into quality assurance of doctoral study programmes, to assess whether higher education institutions have adequate capacities that ensure the acquisition of learning outcomes at the appropriate level of the Croatian Qualification Framework and to identify high-quality doctoral study programmes.

Re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes includes the following aspects of doctoral study programmes:

- Resources: teachers, supervisors, research capacities and infrastructure,
- Internal quality assurance of the programme,
- Support to doctoral candidates and their progression,
- Programme and outcomes of the doctoral study programme.

START OF THE PROCEDURE AND INPUT DOCUMENTS

The higher education institution submits the self-evaluation report (Figure 7) according to the instructions for drafting self-evaluation of a higher education institution and enters the information on quantitative criteria defined 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 4) and the [Ordinance on Conditions for Issuing Licence for Scientific Activity, Conditions for Re-accreditation of Scientific Organisations and Content of Licence](#) (Annex 5) in the information system used by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (MOZVAG).

APPOINTING AN EXPERT PANEL AND A SITE VISIT

The re-accreditation procedure is conducted by a five-member expert panel chaired by a president, which is appointed by the Accreditation Council. Expert panels evaluated several doctoral study programmes within the same scientific area, i.e. cluster.

The site visit usually lasts from 1 to 3 days, according to a predefined site visit protocol. A single panel reviewed several or all doctoral study programmes in a cluster, so that a part of the panel (at least two members and a student) visited each of the HEIs in a cluster. Following the site visits, all panel members participated in a joint meeting and adopted the final quality grades, focusing on the comparability of grades and equality of criteria.

FINAL REPORT

An expert panel drafts the final report with the quality grade of the evaluated study programme, based on materials completed by the higher education institution and the information obtained during the site visit.

The aim of the final report was to provide for comparability between programmes.

ACCREDITATION OPINION

Based on the carried out re-accreditation procedure, the expert panel's final report and the official statement/comments of the higher education institution (if submitted), the Accreditation Council provides an opinion on:

- Issuing a confirmation on the fulfilment of conditions,
- Denial of a licence,
- Issuing a letter of expectation with a time frame for resolving deficiencies of up to three years (AC sets the time limit for eliminating deficiencies).

ACCREDITATION RECOMMENDATION

Following the procedure of re-accreditation and based on a prior opinion of the Accreditation Council, the Agency shall provide an accreditation recommendation to the minister to:

- Issue a confirmation on the fulfilment of conditions,
- Issue a letter of expectation with a time frame for resolving deficiencies of up to 3 years,
- Deny issuance of a licence.

The accreditation recommendation also includes a quality grade of a higher education institution, and recommendations for quality improvement. The Ministry adopts the final decision on accreditation.

FOLLOW-UP

If a certificate on fulfilment of conditions is issued to a higher education institution, the HEI has to adopt a five-year action plan with the aim of improving the quality in accordance with the recommendations of the expert panel and submit a report on the implementation of the action plan to the Agency two years after the action plan was adopted.

If a letter of expectation with a deadline for the elimination of deficiencies of up to three years is issued to a higher education institution, the higher education institution should adopt an action plan based on the recommendations of the expert panel with the aim of eliminating the deficiencies. The higher education institution should submit a report on the elimination of deficiencies every year, until the end of a period for which the letter of expectation was issued.

COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

The Accreditation Council's opinion is submitted to a higher education institution which may submit a complaint to the Complaints Committee appointed by the Management Board of the Agency at the proposal of the Rectors' Council and the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges. The Committee's opinion is submitted to the Accreditation Council.

INFORMING THE STAKEHOLDERS ABOUT THE PROCEDURE AND THE LEGAL EFFECT OF THE PROCEDURE

The final expert panel report in Croatian and English, an official statement of a higher education institution on the final report, and the accreditation recommendation of the Agency are public documents, published on the Agency's website after the completion of the re-accreditation procedure.

After the re-accreditation procedure is carried out, the Agency gathers feedback from a higher education institution and members of the expert panel. This information is collected for the purpose of improving the work of the Agency.

The Agency maintains the Directory of study programmes of higher education institutions and updates the information in the Directory of study programmes on ASHE's website in accordance with the outcome of re-accreditation of a higher education institution.

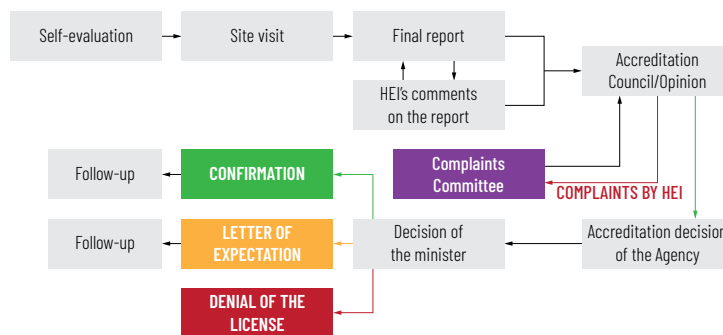


Figure 7 Workflow of re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes

7 AGENCY'S INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

By decision of the Management Board, in 2006 ASHE established an integrated quality assurance system in line with the ESG and requirements of the ISO 9001 standard. In practice, this means the application of a process approach and the implementation of the Deming cycle (the PDCA, Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle). The new editions of ESG and the ISO 9001 standard from 2015, recommendations for improvement contained in the ENQA Agency Review Report from 2017, annual external and internal audit reports, gained experience as well as changes in the internal and external environment stimulated the beginning of a new development cycle. This resulted in the adoption of new external evaluation procedures with a set of improvements in the implementation of the procedures, which is explained in detail in Chapters 10 and 12, the revision of other procedures, the implementation of a risk management procedure, a new quality policy and a number of other improvements.

7.1 QUALITY POLICY, MISSION, VISION, STRATEGY

[The Quality Policy](#) provides the overall direction for all activities and represents a framework for the development of ASHE and its internal quality assurance system. The Policy is based on national legal framework, the Ethical Codes of the Accreditation Council and the Committee for Ethics in Science and Higher Education, the ESG, the ISO 9001 standard and work in accordance with accepted organisational values and examples of good international practice, with the aim of continuously enhance the quality of all activities. The Quality Policy is realised through the active participation of employees and stakeholders in the implementation of processes and activities that are an integral part of the quality assurance system. In doing so, all employees have access to documents concerning the quality system that are available on the shared folders within the organisation (Quality Manual, procedures, operating procedures, forms, analyses, reports, development suggestions, etc.). Documents are updated in accordance with considered initiatives, needs and assigned responsibilities. Development strategic goals are defined in the strategic document. The five-year strategic period from 2016 to 2020 ended last year; in this period the defined strategic goals were realised and a new strategic document [ASHE Strategy 2021 – 2025](#) was drawn up. A team of ASHE employees and stakeholders participated in the preparation of the strategic document, with the support of feedback from all employees and members of the Accreditation Council and the Management Board. The Strategy defines the mission, vision, values and strategic goals for the next period. The document is published and available on ASHE's webpage.

The mission states that ASHE in cooperation with stakeholders promotes the ongoing development of quality assurance in higher education and science, with the aim of continuous quality enhancement of higher education institutions and scientific organisations.

Through its [vision](#) ASHE strives to be recognised as an example of good practice and creativity in the field of quality assurance of higher education and science at national and international level.

The Strategy has two main goals and complementary sub-goals. Considering the dynamic changes in the environment, ASHE's Strategy is focused on the preservation of the relevance of external quality assurance and the enhancement of ASHE's social role, with the aim of promoting the quality of higher education and science.

The Strategy is operationalized through the implementation of annual operative plans. At the beginning of each year, the Management Board adopts the annual operative plan on the basis of the adopted strategic document, while at the end of the year it adopts the report on the realisation of the operative plan.

7.2 ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Confidentiality, ethical behaviour and professionalism of ASHE employees are ensured by the application of the Labour Act, the employment contract signed between ASHE and the employee, Guidelines for managing conflict of interest of employees in the public sector, Quality Policy, Confidentiality Statement signed by the employee, Code of Ethics of ASHE employees and Code of Conduct of the Accreditation Council, which are all contained in the operative procedures. As regards the Agency's bodies (Accreditation Council and Management Board) and expert panels in external evaluation procedures, the aforementioned principles are described and ensured by the [Act on Quality Assurance](#) (Annex 1), [ASHE's Statute](#) (Annex 3), [Management Board Rules of Procedure](#), [Accreditation Council Rules of Procedure](#) (Annex 6), [Complaints Committee Rules of Procedure](#) (Annex 7), [Follow-up Committee Rules of Procedure](#) (Annex 8) as well as by procedures for individual external evaluations (criteria for the appointment of panel members). Members of Agency's bodies and expert panel members are orally acquainted with documents that regulate ethical principles, they are informed about their availability and the obligation to apply them in their work, and they sign a Statement on confidentiality and conflict of interest. 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 is applied to the entire science and higher education system in the Republic of Croatia. ASHE appointed an Ethics Officer in charge of receiving complaints from employees, citizens and other persons regarding suspected unethical and corruptive behaviour. Until now ASHE didn't receive any complaints. ASHE continuously monitors that the work of employees and members of different bodies is professional and in accordance with accepted ethical principles in daily work.

The Agency has implemented the General Data Protection Regulation (SL EU L119, i.e. GDPR) in the sense that it allows data subjects to use special forms, available on the Agency's website, with which they can regulate the use of their personal data in compliance with rights conferred by the GDPR. Also, a Privacy Policy was adopted in relation to the collection and safety of personal data of users of the Agency's website.

Moreover, for the needs of expert panel members, a Statement for the consent to processing of personal data for the external evaluation procedure in higher education and science was adopted. A personal data protection officer was appointed whose tasks include the storage of Statements for the consent to processing personal data for the external evaluation procedure in higher education and science for the needs of expert panel members.

The person in charge of internal reporting of irregularities was appointed too, as well as his/hers deputy, and the form for reporting irregularities is available on the Agency's website. ASHE submits reports on the implementation of activities in relation to the fight against corruption to the competent authorities: the National Council responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Croatian Parliament's National Programme for Suppression of Corruption, the Ministry of Science and Education and the Ministry of Public Administration; the Agency also submits data necessary for the drafting of the annual Ombudsman's Report.

7.3 ASHE'S QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

ASHE has established internal quality assurance procedures for the entire organisation (Figure 8). Documents concerning the quality system are available to all employees. The quality system is a management tool used on all management levels in order to ensure the high quality and efficiency of activities carried out by ASHE and to encourage the continuous enhancement and development of all activities. The quality assurance system includes:

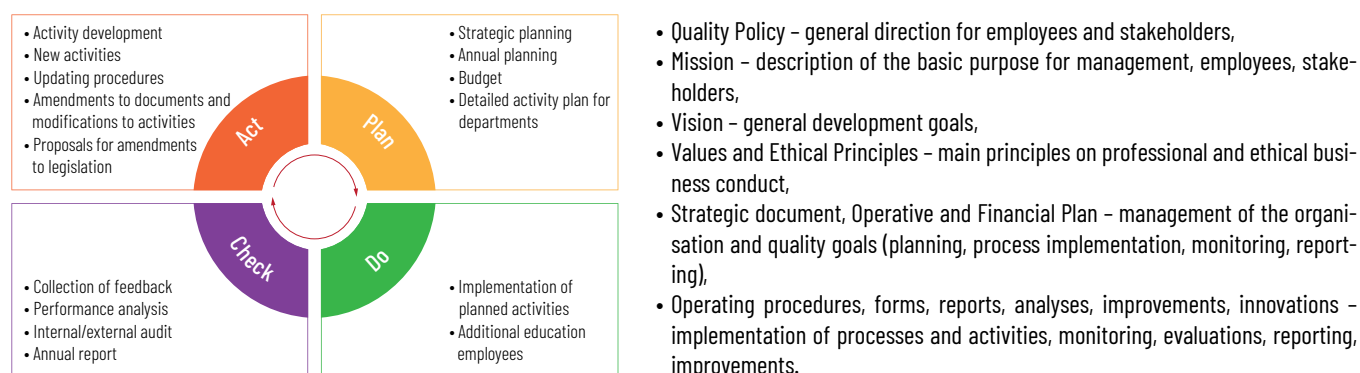


Figure 8. Schematic diagram of PDCA cycle implementation

In January, the Office of internal quality assurance initiates and coordinates the drafting of the annual operative plan, implements the risk management process and encourages the introduction of improvements (Figure 9). The operative plan includes activities for the realisation of strategic goals and sub-goals throughout the year, performance indicators, monitoring mechanism, defined responsibilities and implementation deadlines. All departments participate in the drafting of the operative plan and all employees are involved in this process to a certain extent. The starting points for the planning

process are the mission, strategic goals and sub-goals, vision, policy, financial plan for the current year, external evaluation plans adopted by the Accreditation Council and development initiatives. The drafting of the operative plan and risk assessment are an opportunity for employees to communicate their participation in the implementation of specific activities and processes, as well as their contribution to the realisation of ASHE's strategic goals and mission. The Management Board adopts the annual operative plan which is stored in the CEP database. The Director and Assistant Directors use the policy and the operative plan for management processes, while Heads of Departments use them for process management and the performance of daily activities. The operative planning is closely tied to the financial planning. The financial plan proposal for the next year and projections for the next two years are made from September to December. Croatia's national budget has to be published in the Official Gazette until 31 December of the current year. The realisation of the operative plan is monitored throughout the year. Three reports (and more if needed) are compiled on its realisation as well as quarterly financial reports, and until 31 January, an annual financial report for the previous year is compiled. Assistant Directors and Heads of Departments are in charge of the monitoring of the dynamics and quality of the planned activities implementation, the determination of priorities and resource redistribution, the implementation of risk mitigating measures, the examination of enhancement and development proposals and the realisation of planned results. At the end of the year, the Office of internal quality assurance initiates the drafting of the final report on the realisation of the operative plan which is then presented to the Management Board, the body responsible for its adoption, and used as a basis for the compilation of ASHE's annual report. During December and January, [ASHE's annual report](#) is prepared and adopted by the Management Board, published on the webpage, printed and delivered to stakeholders.

Throughout the year, departments or employees can submit proposals for enhancement, development and innovation. The management examines them and decides on their relevance and application. The Office of internal quality collects data and analyses on the satisfaction of stakeholders from all departments and carries out an analysis for the entire organisation, conducts surveys and analyses data on the satisfaction of employees.

The entire quality assurance system undergoes an internal evaluation (internal audit) whose implementation is under the competence of the Office of internal quality assurance. The audit is carried out once a year in February or March after all reports from the previous year have been compiled, as well as the operative and financial planning for the next year. The internal audit is carried out by ASHE employees who are certified internal auditors. The result of the internal audit is the Management Assessment Report that contains also an analysis of changes regarding external and internal issues, the degree of fulfilment of quality goals, the analysis of the efficiency of measures taken with regard to risks and opportunities, the assessment of the quality of improvements implemented after the internal audit was conducted, the results and conclusions reached on the basis of the analysis of surveys on the satisfaction of stakeholders/users with the Agency's services, the analysis of surveys on the satisfaction of employees and data on the realisation of the adopted annual operative plan. The Management Assessment Report is available to all employees and constitutes the basis for the next cycle of improvements. ASHE also undergoes a regular annual external evaluation (external audit) in accordance with the ISO 9001 standard. The external audit is carried out in September or October by the DNV GL Adriatica certification body. The external evaluation reports have continuously shown high grades awarded to the established quality system. More information on the development of processes and mechanism of the internal quality assurance system can be found in Chapter 9.6.

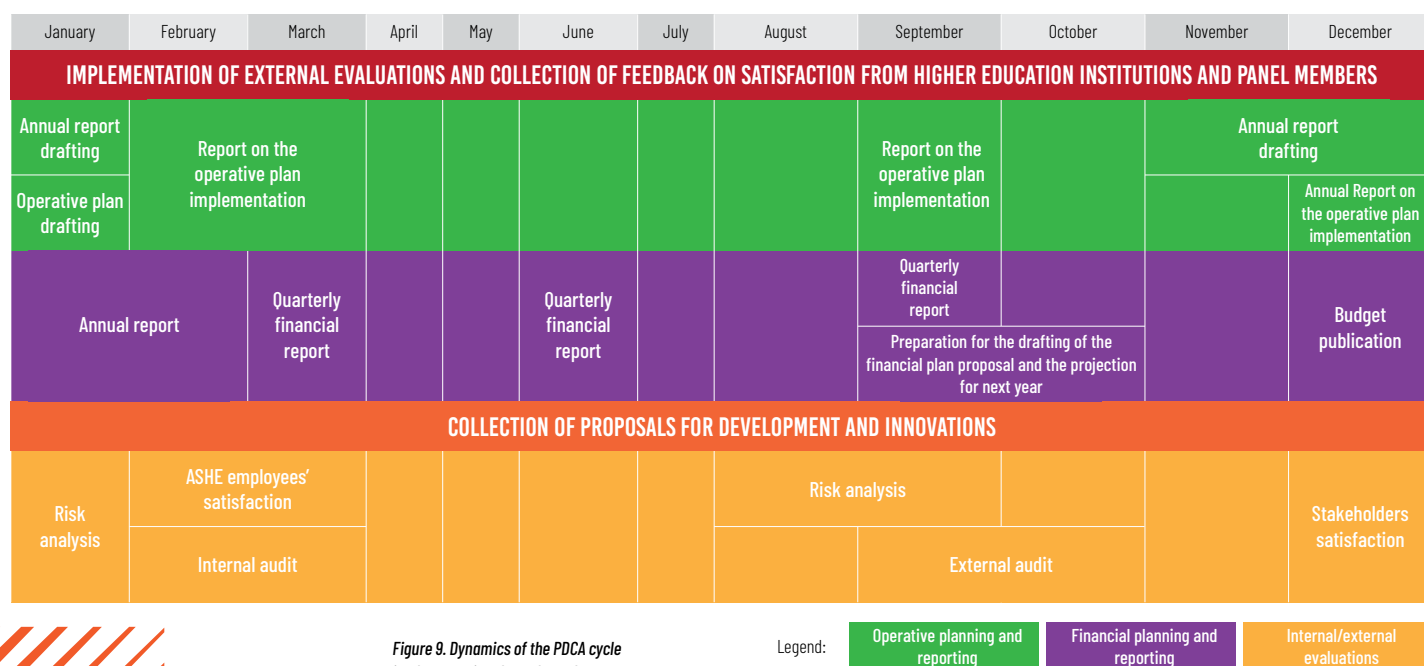


Figure 9. Dynamics of the PDCA cycle implementation throughout the year

Legend:

Operative planning and reporting

Financial planning and reporting

Internal/external evaluations

8 AGENCY'S INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The international dimension of ASHE's activities has been part of its strategic direction from the very beginning of its work. Strengthening of international activities was part of ASHE [Strategy for 2016-2020](#) and it is also an integral part of the [new ASHE Strategy](#) for the next five-year period. International activities include the participation in international projects in the role of project leader or partner, direct cooperation and exchange of experience and knowledge with international partners in the field of higher education, participation and presentations at international conferences and implementation of external evaluation of foreign higher education institutions. ASHE held a number of meetings and workshops upon invitation of colleagues from regional agencies and ministries responsible for higher education to share their knowledge and experience in the implementation of external quality assurance in higher education. Such consultative meetings were organized in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro on several occasions. By providing their expertise ASHE helps agencies in the neighbouring countries to establish their national quality assurance systems. Likewise, ASHE employees participate as reviewers in the international evaluation procedures carried out by other agencies. ASHE includes international experts in almost all procedures of external quality assurance. The procedures are carried out both in Croatian and English and all evaluation outcomes, as well as the annual reports, all ASHE's expert publications and other information is publicly available on ASHE's website in English, as well.

ASHE is a full member of numerous international associations and actively participates in their work.

MEMBERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

ASHE is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEEQA), an international association of institutions interested in the topic of academic ranking and excellence - IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence (IREG Observatory), and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). ASHE is also member of the International Quality Group of the American Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and has an observer status in the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN). ASHE is also a member of the International Quality Group of the American Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and has an observer status in the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN). ASHE is a long-standing member of European networks of national information centres on academic mobility and recognition - ENIC (European Network of National Information Centres on academic recognition and mobility) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres). ASHE is also a member of IAAO (International Association of Admissions Organisations), EUPRIO (European Association of Communication Professionals in Higher Education) and international association GUIDE Association - Global Universities In Distance Education.

In addition to numerous [international projects](#) in which ASHE takes part, it is noteworthy that ASHE was the leader of the project Modernisation of Higher Education Institutions through enhancement of Human Resources Management function ([HRMinHEI](#)) financed from ERASMUS+ programme. General objectives of the project were to improve the organizational efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs, as well as to increase their global competitiveness, to encourage and improve higher education institutions' contribution to economic growth and social development by enhancing the quality of human resources development in the area of higher education, to stimulate excellence of HEIs' staff and cooperation within the European Higher Education Area. ASHE took part in the [DEQAR project](#) aimed at building the European database containing information about the outcomes of evaluation of higher education institutions and also participates in the new [DEQAR Connect](#) project - Enhancing the Coverage and Connectivity of QA in the EHEA through DEQAR. ASHE is member of the Steering Group in the project Stacking credits & the future of the qualification (STACQ) and has participated as partner in a number of projects started within ENIC and NARIC network and financed from the ERASMUS+ programme:

- Effective partnership for enhanced recognition (EPER),
- Allocating Credit to European Professional Training Programmes (ACEPT),
- Automatic Recognition in the Adriatic Region (AdReN),
- Online course catalogues and databases for transparency and recognition (OCTRA),
- Recognition of Non-Country Specific Awards (RENSA),
- Information System On pre-Bologna Academic Qualifications (ISOBAQ).

ASHE was also partner in the projects Modernisation, Education and Human Rights ([MEHR](#)), Evaluating e-learning for academic recognition ([e-Valuate](#)), Keep innovation in Multi Partnership Cooperation in Lifelong Guidance Services (KEEP IN PACT), Strengthening Professional Higher Education and VET in Central & South Eastern Europe (PROCSEE), Emphasis on developing and upgrading of competences for academic teaching (EDUCA-T).

ASHE leads a major project "Improvement of quality assurance and Project enhancement systems in higher education

[SKAZVO](#) financed from the Operational Programme “Efficient Human Resources” (2014–2020) of the European Social Fund (ESF). The project resulted in the development of new and improvement to the existing external evaluation procedures at Croatian higher education institutions and study programmes, as well as improvement of the quality of study programmes and strengthening of competences of HEI staff. The project introduced new activities, such as collecting information and informing the general public about higher education and developing counselling services for present and future students.

Project activities are carried out by ASHE employees in cooperation with Croatian and foreign stakeholders and experts.

ASHE LEADS A MAJOR PROJECT “IMPROVEMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROJECT ENHANCEMENT SYSTEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION SKAZVO”, FINANCED FROM THE OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME “EFFICIENT HUMAN RESOURCES” (2014–2020) OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND (ESF).

In addition to their numerous international activities, in 2019, ASHE started with the organization of support to Croatian higher education institution in the strengthening of their international visibility, by carrying out various activities to internationalize Croatian higher education.

In addition to ASHE's Standards for the evaluation of quality of higher education institutions in the re-accreditation process, which include the internationalization standard, ASHE organized training events and other activities aimed at providing support and setting up a platform for the networking of higher education institutions, by encouraging them to systematically reflect on and develop the strategies and strategic activities for the strengthening of internationalization. This especially concerns outgoing and incoming student and teacher mobility, launching of new study programmes in foreign languages and launching of joint studies, but also the internationalization of internal quality assurance processes, higher education institutions management and other activities.

9 COMPLIANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (PART 3)

9.1 ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

With its [Quality Policy](#), ASHE defined a general direction of its operation and development, and undertaken to act in accordance with the legislative framework, ESG and the Code of Ethics. The Policy is achieved through the implementation of institutional mission and strategy. The mission states that by implementing activities within its scope of work, in cooperation with its stakeholders, ASHE makes a continuous contribution to the improvement of quality and development of higher education and science. For more information see Chapter 7.1.

Mission and vision are an integral part of [ASHE's 2021-2025 Strategy](#). The mission is achieved through the implementation of strategic goals, and strategic goals through the implementation of activities included in the annual operational and financial plan. In accordance with assigned responsibilities, each department contributes to the planned activities by implementing daily tasks. During the year, the implementation of planned activities is monitored, analysed and reported, priorities are adjusted if necessary, and at the end of the year the Management Board adopts the report on the implementation of the annual operational plan, as well as the Agency's annual report, which is published on ASHE website, and sent to stakeholders in printed form.

External quality assurance activities are defined by the Act and described in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 10 describes the manner in which ESG Part 2 (standards 2.1-2.7) is implemented in the external quality assurance activities in Croatia.

External quality assurance activities are carried out regularly and periodically, in accordance with clearly defined objectives (more information is provided in Chapter 6), procedures, timetables, manuals and guidelines, published on ASHE website. Processes are transparent at all stages, and ASHE regularly informs the stakeholders involved in their development and implementation. Plans for the implementation of external evaluations are developed at the level of a calendar or academic year, and are an integral part of operational and financial plans. External evaluation plans are submitted in advance to the institutions involved, and published on ASHE website. Procedure outcomes are published upon their completion.

ASHE stakeholders are actively involved in the management of the Agency (more information is provided in Chapters 4 and 7) and in the development, planning, implementation and improvement of external quality assurance activities (Table 2).

Phases of external quality assurance process	Participation of stakeholders
Development	Stakeholders are members of committees in charge of the development of new external quality assurance procedures. Higher education institutions and all the stakeholders are invited to comment on draft proposals, which are put to public review.
Planning	Accreditation Council introduces annual plans. Management Board adopts the plans. The higher education institution may request a postponement in the implementation of a specific procedure, providing a valid reason is given.
Implementation	Expert panels Higher education institutions and their stakeholders Accreditation Council Follow-up Committee Complaints Committee
Improvements	Expert panels via questionnaires. Higher education institutions via questionnaires and other mechanisms / communication channels.

Table 2 Participation of stakeholders in development and implementation of external quality assurance activities in higher education

The manner in which ASHE engages its stakeholders in processes, and development and implementation of quality assurance activities is described in more detail in Chapters 6, 7 and 10. Stakeholder feedback and opinions are described in Chapter 11. Analysis of stakeholders' feedback shows that higher education institutions and other stakeholders trust the Agency and appreciate its work and contribution to the development of the system of higher education and science.

All the stakeholders from the system of science and higher education, including students, are represented in the work of the Agency and its management and expert bodies. The composition of these bodies (Management Board, Accreditation Council, Complaints Committee, Follow-up Committee, expert panels for external evaluation), the manner and scope of their work, and the established quality assurance mechanisms are described in Chapters 4, 6 and 7.

As described in Chapter 4, ASHE's scope of work also includes a number of activities that are not the subject of this external evaluation by ENQA: different types of evaluation in science; collection and analyses of data, producing statistics and providing information on the higher education and science sector; professional recognition of foreign higher education

qualifications; admission to higher education institutions and professional support to bodies in higher education and science, which also includes administrative support for appointments to higher teaching and scientific grades. The implementation of these activities contributes to improving the quality of higher education and science and strengthening trust in ASHE. It is only possible in cooperation with our stakeholders.

Evaluation of scientific research, to the extent research is carried out at higher education institutions, is embedded in re-accreditation and audit procedures, and is not conducted as a separate evaluation procedure. Evaluation of scientific organisations that are not higher education institutions follows the some ESG standards and guidelines, and is effectively similar to initial accreditation, re-accreditation and audit procedures as described herein. In addition, 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 data already collected. Information collected through other ASHE activities is also used in the external quality assurance processes. 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 and information of their employability; Dept. of Analytics and Statistics collects and compiles data from various sources, e.g. the Croatian Bureau of Statistics. It 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 available on the Study in Croatia website. 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 involved in the development of a national higher education database.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

The announced amendments to the Act on Quality Assurance that, inter alia, regulates the work of Agency's bodies, have not been implemented in the period since the last ENQA evaluation. In order to add an international dimension and improve the work of the Accreditation Council, two associate members were added who actively participate in its work. One of them is a representative of the international academic community, and the other is a representative of NGO from the field of higher education and science. In the first amendments to the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education, ASHE plans to propose the establishment of a separate advisory body comprising international experts, in order to strengthen its international perspective and thus contribute to further development and improvement of external quality assurance activities.

9.2 ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

The Agency was established in 2005 by Government Decree (OG 101/04, 08/07). In 2009, the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (OG 45/09) clearly defined the role of the Agency as a national body for quality assurance and improvement in the system of higher education and science, for which purpose it carries out external quality evaluation procedures of higher education institutions and other entities. In initial accreditation and re-accreditation, the decision on the procedure outcome - based on the accreditation recommendation, which the Agency issues with the prior opinion of its expert body, the Accreditation Council - is left to the discretion of the Ministry. In audit procedures the final decision is passed by the Accreditation Council. Since ASHE is registered in EQAR, it is recognised for its quality outside the Republic of Croatia; the Agency receives calls for conducting cross-border external evaluations, which it accepts in accordance with available resources, thus contributing to the strengthening of quality of interested parties.

9.3 ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

ASHE's operational and functional independence is reflected in a way in which it carries out its tasks, in accordance with the existing regulations, and by conforming to and applying the ESG and best international practices.

The independence of the Agency is defined by the Act on Quality Assurance, Article 3 Para. 1: *Agency shall have the status of an independent legal person with public authorities entered to the judicial records.* and Article 4 Para. 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.*

Agency's independence is evidenced by the following:

- The Management Board of the Agency is appointed by the Croatian Parliament (a representative body of citizens and holder of legislative power in the Republic of Croatia) at the proposal of stakeholders, except for one representative of ASHE employees.
- The Management Board of the Agency appoints the Accreditation Council (AC) at the proposal of the Director, based on the received proposals by stakeholders.
- In the appointment of AC members, special attention is paid to the balance of interests and representation of all official nominators (stakeholders), which prevents the excessive influence of a single higher education institution.
- Students are equal members of both bodies. The AC also includes a representative of the business sector and a representative of civil society (associate member) that can be from Croatia or abroad.
- The Agency, i.e. the AC, adopts a plan of external evaluations in accordance with its authority, and independently decides on the evaluation implementation; procedures, criteria, selection of expert panel members, evaluation results and other related issues.
- AC appoints the expert panels, and the higher education institution may point out a possible conflict of interest and comment on the composition of the expert panel.
- All members of the AC and all members of the expert panels sign a Confidentiality and Non-conflict of Interest Statement, as well as a contract which clearly states that they do not represent anyone else, including their employers, in their work for the Agency; members of the AC are thus excluded from discussions and decisions on issues that involve a conflict of interest.

This independence is also reflected in the work of Agency's expert and advisory bodies, such as the Complaints Committee and the Follow-up Committee, the composition, scope and work of which are described in more detail in their respective rules of procedure.

In addition to the independence of the work of ASHE bodies, the operational independence is also ensured by adopting methodologies for individual evaluations, their respective regulations and other implementing acts, as well as by the independent work of expert panel members. As previously mentioned, the expert panels regularly include foreign members, thus preventing the possible influence of interest groups within the small Croatian academic community. The members of the expert panels independently prepare the final report and make quality assessments. The AC issues its expert opinion on the basis of all relevant documentation from the evaluation procedure. Independence is also ensured through the Accreditation Council's decision-making process, which is described in more detail in its rules of procedure (e.g., Article 14 describes the way in which opinions are issued in the procedures of re-accreditation of higher education institutions). Independence is also ensured through expert panels' quality assessments in individual evaluation procedures (the method of assessing/grading quality is described in more detail in individual implementing acts).

If necessary, the AC can request additional statements and/or clarifications from the expert panel, ASHE coordinator, as well as the evaluated institution.

Accreditation recommendation is an independent professional opinion issued by the Agency on the basis of a conducted external evaluation procedure, based on which MSE decides on the evaluation procedure outcome.

The independence of the Agency is ensured by financing from the state budget, as well as from the EU funds. In order to strengthen its independence, the Agency has started preliminary activities for the implementation of the evaluation of joint studies, and quality evaluation of higher education institutions abroad.

It is also important to emphasise the advisory role of the Agency in terms of training and educating stakeholders in the system, particularly the training of higher education institutions and expert panel members involved in various external evaluation procedures.



9.4 ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

ASHE's activities are aimed at improving and developing the national quality assurance system. In order to achieve these objectives in a clear, efficient and transparent manner, the Agency regularly prepares different types of thematic analyses. These refer to the analyses of data, reports and results of external evaluations, which, according to the annual plan, include institutions that deliver study programmes in the same scientific field, as well as comprehensive analyses of evaluations and evaluation procedures at the end of each cycle.

Annual thematic analyses and analyses at the end of an evaluation cycle systematize data on institutions, provide in-depth analyses of the expert panels' findings and synthesize findings at the level of scientific fields, types of institutions and, ultimately, the entire system. These documents include analyses and reviews of the evaluation procedures' fitness for purpose, and the satisfaction of the involved stakeholders. A separate thematic analysis of the applied evaluation methodologies, for now only in science, includes an analysis of the common characteristics of indicators in the external evaluation of scientific activity and internal quality assurance of scientific institutions.

THEMATIC EVALUATIONS AIM TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT OF INSTITUTIONS, EVALUATION PROCEDURES AND THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

Thematic analyses point to important findings after each evaluation procedure. Their results form the basis of various activities carried out by the Agency: adjustments of evaluation processes and methodologies, launch of new and/or adjustment of the existing evaluation

procedures in order to provide a more in-depth insight into specific segments of the system (e.g. doctoral studies), and implementation of activities for system-wide improvements (providing decision-makers with analyses of system's weaknesses and strengths, implementing projects and workshops for improving identified institutional weaknesses, e.g. internationalisation, scientific productivity, etc.).

Thematic evaluations aim to contribute to the quality improvement of institutions, evaluation procedures and the national system of higher education.

1) THEMATIC ANALYSES OF THE RESULTS OF EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS

Three separately published analyses include data from the re-accreditation of higher education institutions in the field of technical sciences, biotechnical sciences and social sciences – economics. The *Analysis of re-accreditation of higher education institutions in the field of technical sciences* includes 16 higher education institutions evaluated according to the 2018 annual plan of re-accreditation, and three higher education institutions re-accredited in 2017/2018, within a pilot re-accreditation. The *Analysis of re-accreditation of higher education institutions in the field of economics* includes six higher education institutions evaluated during 2017 and 2018, in the second re-accreditation cycle. The *Analysis of re-accreditation of higher education institutions in the field of biotechnical sciences* includes five higher education institutions evaluated according to the 2019 annual plan of re-accreditation, and one higher education institution re-accredited in 2017/2018, within a pilot re-accreditation. All three analyses aimed to show and interpret in a comprehensive, quantitative and statistical manner the current situation at higher education institutions, as seen in the re-accreditation procedures, and link it with the procedure outcomes and expert panels' assessments and grades, as well as their views on the identified shortcomings and recommendations for improvement of teaching and research activities at evaluated institutions.

The Overview of re-accreditation of doctoral studies in the Republic of Croatia includes the analysis of external evaluation of doctoral studies in the Republic of Croatia, conducted by ASHE in the 2016-2019 period. The document systematizes key data on doctoral study programmes at the system level (their number and type, structure of programmes, students and teachers) and evaluation outcomes, and provides quantitative and qualitative analyses of the expert panels' findings. Finally, the analyses provide an overview of the process itself, its methodology, outcomes, and reflections of its participants. As a final objective, the document provides conclusions arising from this evaluation, as well as the system-level recommendations for improvement. The publication was presented at the Evaluation of doctoral studies in Croatia conference, and is available both in printed and electronic form.

2) THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF METHODOLOGIES

The Agency also produced a thematic analysis of methodologies for quality assurance of scientific activity in Croatia. The purpose of a thematic analysis is to highlight specific characteristics of the evaluations and of monitoring evaluations' quality through analyses of methodologies, indicators and findings in the external evaluations of scientific organisations, particularly in the part related to internal quality assurance of scientific activity. These topics emerged from previous evaluations in science as areas where a need was identified for additional efforts by higher education institutions in terms of improvement. The publication Quality Assurance of Scientific Activity in Croatia – Analysis of Evaluation Methodologies contributes to the discussion on quality assurance of scientific activity, aiming to help scientific organisations in building effective internal quality assurance systems, i.e. in developing internal mechanisms for quality improvement and building institutional identity.

3) ANALYSES AND REPORTS OF VARIOUS ACTIVITIES

In addition to different thematic analyses, the Agency also conducts analyses of various activities related to quality assurance, and publishes newsletters, annual reports and professional and scientific papers:

Quality assurance:

- Guidelines and Procedures for the Recognition and Evaluation of Non-formal and Informal Learning
- Guidelines for Development, Accreditation and Implementation of Joint Programmes
- Results of research Challenges in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation
- Higher education in the Republic of Croatia: Guide for members of expert panels in evaluations of higher education institutions and scientific organisations
- Academic ranking
- Aspects of internationalization of higher education: Attracting students from abroad
- Quality Assurance of Doctoral Studies
- Quality Assurance of Scientific Activity in Croatia – Analysis of Evaluation Methodologies
- Overview of Re-accreditation of Doctoral Studies in the Republic of Croatia

ENQA:

- Advancing quality in European higher education celebrating 20 years of ENQA
- Report of ENQA working group for quality assurance and e-learning (Considerations for quality assurance of e-learning provision)

Employability:

- Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in EU context
- Results of research on student satisfaction with study programmes and their readiness for the labour market
- What to do after graduation?

Careers:

- Report on the research of current situation and challenges regarding the operation of career centres and career guidance at higher education institutions
- Establishment, work and needs of career guidance services for students and employees at higher education institutions
- Overview of recent European and national policies in regard to HRM in HEIs within European Higher Education Area
- Guidelines for Human Resources Management (HRM) at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka - selected processes and tools
- Guidelines for Human Resources Management (HRM) at higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia

Students:

- Become a student in Croatia
- Study in Croatia
- What to do after high school?

Newsletters and reports:

- ASHE newsletters (since 2014)
- Annual reports (since 2007)

Leaflets:

- External Quality Assurance – leaflet for foreign reviewers
- Recognition of foreign qualifications
- Bologna Process
- Learning outcomes
- Recognition and assessment of formal and informal learning

9.5 ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

9.5.1 FINANCIAL RESOURCES

IN THE 2016-2021 PERIOD, ASHE IS IMPLEMENTING SKAZVO PROJECT. THE VALUE OF THE PROJECT IS HRK 20,391,217.54, OF WHICH 85 % IS A DIRECT ALLOCATION TO ASHE FROM THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND (OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME "EFFICIENT HUMAN RESOURCES" 2014-2020).

ASHE's annual budget is a part of the state budget allocated to the Ministry of Science and Education. State budget is adopted by the Parliament upon the Government proposal. ASHE independently proposes its budget, based on the previous year's budget and in accordance with the annual guidelines for the preparation of the state budget issued by the Ministry of Finance. Since 2011, the budget is planned for a three-year period; the current budget period runs until 2023. After the Ministry of Finance approves the budget, the Agency independently decides on the financing of its activities with regard to the available funds. In the 2017-2020 period, the Agency's budget has been stable, amounting to approx. HRK 25,000,000 (including EU funds), with maximum variations of 10% from one year to the next. This method of financing ensures the Agency's independence from higher education institutions. Its disadvantage are potential delays in the allocation of funds, and the fact that the unspent funds must be returned to the state budget at the end of the year, which may cause temporary problems with the availability of funds.

The Agency also makes use of EU structural funds and programmes, which open the door to cooperation with European partners, development and innovation, and pilot implementation of new processes, for which there would perhaps be no funds in the regular operating budget. Making use of two different sources of funding / budget instead of one is an additional guarantee of financial stability. Project funding is not subject to the same deadlines and procedures as budget funding, and the Agency can rely on it in case problems occur with budget funding.

In the 2016-2021 period, ASHE is implementing SKAZVO project. The value of the project is HRK 20,391,217.54, of which 85 % is a direct allocation to ASHE from the European Social Fund (Operational Programme "Efficient Human Resources" 2014-2020). The aim of the project was to develop new procedures (re-accreditation of higher education institutions and initial accreditation of study programmes), and improve the existing external evaluation procedures of Croatian higher education institutions and study programmes, as well as to improve the quality of study programmes and strengthen the competencies of HEI staff. The project introduced new activities related to the collection of data from higher education institutions, and an upgrade of the MOZVAG2 information system that supports the re-accreditation of higher education institutions.

The Statute allows the Agency to generate income. In this strategic period, ASHE will additionally focus on the implementation of cross-border evaluations and thus ensure another source of funding, which will further strengthen our financial stability.

9.5.2 IT RESOURCES

ASHE applies a number of information systems for data collection and processing that are used for the implementation and improvement of different organisational processes. Some information systems are used at the national level, while others are used at the Agency level only, as a support for everyday activities. ASHE continually works on integrating and consolidating data from all information systems, in order to get accurate and timely information for decision-making processes. Information system safety policy defines acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, a clear division of tasks and responsibilities, and prescribes sanctions in case of non-compliance. Within SKAZVO project, ASHE conducted an analysis of all its business processes and developed a conceptual design of its future IT system, which should support the improved business processes as efficiently as possible.

Technological innovations and the need for further digitalisation of business processes require continuous investment in the procurement and maintenance of IT infrastructure, as well as in training of employees and users. Special attention is paid to the security and reliability of the IT infrastructure, with the use of new technologies and monitoring market trends in order to maintain the integrity, availability and confidentiality of data. In order to improve security and scalability, ASHE joined the Establishing Shared Services Centre (SSC), an umbrella project of all digitalisation initiatives at the national level. The aim of the project is to create a system that would enable communication between all national registers and databases, which would essentially digitalise public administration and processes on the national level.

Part of the development of IT support was achieved through commitment and own know-how. One example is the development of a CEP database containing all data related to the implementation of external evaluation procedures. CEP database provides an easy overview and analysis of all active and completed evaluation procedures and their specifics; documents used in the evaluation, information on reviewers who participated in the evaluation procedure, evaluation outcomes, etc. Said data was used for connecting with the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), used by EQAR member agencies. The aim of this project is to increase transparency in quality assurance procedures in higher education within the European Higher Education Area.

CEP database also contains annual operational plans, and allows for monitoring of their implementation and generating reports. It also includes a risk database, from which analyses can be conducted if needed, as well as information on professional development of employees, etc.

During 2018, ASHE has – in cooperation with University Computing Centre Srce – developed the MOZVAG2 system for the implementation of the second cycle of re-accreditation of higher education institutions. The system has been upgraded and improved several times in order to optimize delivery of higher education institutions' data. More specifically, this ena-

bled the option of download/transfer of data from the information systems Croatian Scientific Bibliography [CROSB](#) and the Database of Project Activities in Science and Higher Education in Croatia ([Project Database](#)), which are developed and maintained for the purposes of external evaluation by the Centre for Scientific Information of the Ruđer Bošković Institute together with ASHE. The information that can be transferred relates to scientific and professional activities at the level of the higher education institution and individual teachers.

The Agency provides technical support to the expert bodies (Accreditation Council, Follow-up Committee, Complaints Committee, scientific field committees, National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development) operating within the Agency, by providing their members with relevant information and documents for review, analyses and informed decision-making, via a protected part of ASHE website or a separate website. The Agency quickly responded to the challenges brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, and ensured the continuity of work of these bodies through the most popular platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams), including the necessary training of its members.

9.5.3 HUMAN RESOURCES

The most important investment of the Agency is that in human resources education, training and development, since our employees and stakeholders are our greatest strength and value. The Agency has 72 employees: in comparison, in 2017 it had 71 employees. Most of the employees (65) hold higher education degrees, including seven PhDs and three Magisters of Science (Mr. Sc.). Since 2017, two employees obtained their PhD degrees, and nine completed their university graduate studies / specialist graduate professional studies. Twenty employees work in external quality assurance in higher education and science, i.e. conduct external evaluation procedures with the help from colleagues from other departments. Due to interest of foreign higher education institutions in the evaluation procedures carried out by ASHE, as well as the changes in the environment, innovations in the field of external quality assurance and tasks related to the implementation of the Act on CROQF, additional efforts will be needed in managing employees' workload in the following period. The taking on of new tasks and development of new activities will require hiring of new employees for tasks related to quality assurance in higher education.

Assistant directors, together heads of departments, plan and organise further professional development of ASHE employees and encourage them to specialise in certain areas of quality assurance, e.g. e-learning, joint studies, internal quality assurance, support for career development, learning outcomes, micro-credentials, online credentials etc. Two employees and two members of the Accreditation Council completed the ENQA Training of Agency Reviewers, three employees completed the ENQA Leadership Programme, 11 employees completed training for ISO 9001 internal auditors and two for lead auditors; we have also made a number of study visits to sister agencies within CEENQA and ENQA exchange programmes for employees of quality assurance agencies. ASHE employees visited similar agencies in Israel, Slovenia, the Netherlands, Germany, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, and we hosted colleagues from the Netherlands, Slovenia, Turkey, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malaysia, and Azerbaijan. A number of eminent experts visited ASHE and held lectures for the employees: Judith S. Eaton (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, CHEA), Prof. Robert W. Robertson (Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute), Dr. Mary Catharine Lennon and Jason Yeung (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, PEQAB, Canada), Francisco Marmolejo (World Bank specialist), Ms. Romina Miorelli (University of Westminster, London), Mr. Alex Usher (Higher Education Strategy Associates – HESA, Toronto), etc.

Employees in other directorates and departments are also continuously trained in various fields, such as public procurement, preparation of projects for ESI funds, professional and academic recognition of higher education qualifications, legal status and international protection of refugees and displaced persons, e-communication with courts, etc.

The number of employees is stable, however, it should be noted that the number of tasks assigned to the Agency has increased over the years. ASHE is part of the public administration system, which is to undergo reforms in the near future. Employment is limited and salaries are lower than in the private sector. One of our major challenges is how to recruit and retain educated and qualified employees. We find it important that ASHE is recognised as an organisation that provides an attractive work environment. Employees are given the opportunity for further education, and professional and career development. ASHE defined a competency profile for all positions within the organisation, and developed a performance management system. Particular attention is paid to new employees. They are assigned a mentor who – together with the department head – makes sure that they get acquainted with the organisational values, strategic direction, internal quality assurance system and their work tasks, and who takes care of their integration into the team and further professional development.

ASHE is an organisation with a lot of young employees, which was an incentive for our participation in the EU-funded project "In Pursuit of Full Equality between Men and Women: Reconciliation of Private and Family Life". We are the first public sector institution in Croatia to successfully pass the assessment of gender and family policies. In addition to raising awareness of this issue and implementing activities that have contributed to further improvements, ASHE has been awarded the advanced MAMFORCE standard for the implementation of gender and family policies.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

In accordance with recommendations from the previous ENQA evaluation, ASHE hired two new staff members; one in the Audit Department, and another in the Department of Analytics and Statistics, who also participates in external evaluation procedures.

9.6 ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

ASHE was established as a national agency for quality assurance tasked with contributing to the development of the system of higher education and science in the Republic of Croatia. Due to its responsibilities, it has been important for the Agency to establish a functional and effective internal quality assurance system, which is described in more detail under Chapter 7.

The quality policy is implemented through the established processes, whereby strategic plans are translated into operational plans, and the adopted plans are implemented through everyday activities that include the participation of ASHE employees, members of its various bodies, committees and stakeholders.

ASHE developed an employee competency profile for all positions within the organisation, which is used in recruitment, monitoring of employees' effectiveness, career development and motivating employees to keep their competencies up to date through continuous learning. Each external evaluation procedure defines the competencies of expert panel members, which are used in the selection and appointment of panel members. At the end of the procedure, the evaluated higher education institutions and ASHE coordinator evaluate the expertise and quality of panel members. Best-rated panel members are invited to participate again in the same, or some other external evaluation procedure conducted by ASHE, and are recommended to other agencies.

Chapter 7.2 Ethical principles describes the legislative framework that prescribes ethical behaviour in the academic community, as well as the professional behaviour and integrity of public sector employees and stakeholders involved in the implementation of Agency's various activities. The chapter also describes the organisational measures against intolerance and all forms of discrimination.

Transparency of work is ensured by involving stakeholders in all processes and activities: from management, decision making, planning, procedure implementation, publication of outcomes, collection of feedback on the quality of implemented activities and related improvements, to development of new procedures.

All external evaluation procedures are regularly evaluated in order to obtain feedback on their quality, and whether they fulfil the set goals, and encourage improvement.

ASHE established a number of mechanisms for collecting and analysing feedback and encouraging the improvement of processes, criteria and the overall work. We use surveys and questionnaires, collect feedback at meetings with various stakeholder groups, particularly higher education institutions, at regular internal meetings of ASHE employees, especially meetings of coordinators in different external evaluation procedures, via e-mail and by indirect methods - through media analyses, ongoing cooperation with academic community at meetings of various bodies (e.g. MSE, Rectors' Conference, Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, Croatian Student Council, National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development, etc.), through workshops, round tables, conferences and projects aimed at quality improvement.

ASHE conducts an annual survey of its stakeholders regarding their satisfaction with the work of the Agency, particularly the external quality assurance procedures it carries out.

During the year, after each external evaluation procedure is completed, an anonymous questionnaire is sent to evaluated higher education institutions or scientific organisations, and members of the expert panels (foreign and national academics, students and representatives of the business sector) in order to collect their feedback. The stakeholders are encouraged to share their experiences and provide suggestions for improvement. The collected information is analysed, and based on the results, quality index is calculated and trends monitored. For more information see chapter 11.

Joint coordinator meetings are regularly held, and are also attended by department heads and assistant directors. At these meetings, feedback is exchanged on the evaluations carried out, experiences and risks are discussed, good practices identified and the implementation of improvements encouraged. Coordinators also provide feedback on external evaluations to the Accreditation Council. Once a year, members of the Accreditation Council fill in an anonymous questionnaire evaluating the cooperation with different ASHE departments, sharing their experiences, and providing their commendations and suggestions for improvements.

An employee satisfaction survey is conducted once a year, and the analysis thereof is used to improve the organisational effectiveness.

ASHE publishes an annual report which, in addition to an overview of implemented activities, also contains the analyses of stakeholder and employee satisfaction surveys. The Agency also publishes syntheses of re-accreditation procedures, by scientific fields, and annual meta-evaluations of conducted audits; both include analyses of stakeholder feedback.

Each year, during internal and external audits, a number of elements are considered related to the achievement of planned goals, quality of work, risk analysis, available resources, expertise and ethics of employees, collected feedback on processes and criteria, and trends and initiatives, as well as the improvements made since the last audit, their impact and suggestions for further development, and information on appeals and complaints.

Based on the recommendations for improvement from the last ENQA evaluation report, ASHE developed an action plan for the follow-up phase, which was fully accepted by ENQA. ASHE informed ENQA on the implementation of planned activities, and they were discussed during the progress visit by the ENQA panel representatives.

The improvements made since the last ENQA evaluation are listed in Chapters 10 and 12, with a particular emphasis on improvements in segments that were assessed by partial compliance in the previous evaluation.

Croatian legislation clearly defines the status of ASHE in relation to the relevant competent authorities, and the status of institutions that are subject to ASHE accreditation. ASHE management maintains continuous communication with MSE. The announced amendments to the legislation will also include provisions regulating cross-border cooperation.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

After the completion of the second cycle of external evaluations, ASHE will conduct a comprehensive survey and analyse the perception and the impact of implemented activities on the development of higher education institutions and the overall system. Feedback analysis will be used in the development of the next cycle of external evaluations.

9.7 ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

ASHE's strategic goal is to fulfil the conditions and renew its full membership in ENQA and EQAR. This entails a conformity with Parts II and III of the ESG, which is subject to international external evaluation in 5-year cycles. First such evaluation of ASHE was conducted in 2011, and second in 2016/2017. ASHE's full membership in ENQA lasts until 13 January, 2022 and in EQAR until 28 February, 2022. [The report of the ENQA evaluation panel](#) is available on ASHE website. The report was also submitted to the Minister of Science and Education, and members of the Rectors' Conference and Council of Polytechnics and Colleges. In addition to findings that refer to ASHE's compliance with individual standards and guidelines (ESG Parts II and III), the report also contains recommendations for improvement in the following period. In the follow up stage, ASHE developed and submitted its action plan, which was fully accepted by the ENQA Board. As part of the ENQA progress visit, on 11 March 2019, ASHE was visited by the chair and one member of the ENQA evaluation panel. In accordance with the agreed protocol, the participants of the meeting discussed the improvements that ASHE made during the follow-up stage, namely the new procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions and the development of a new model of initial accreditation, which includes a stronger application of the CROQF principles, the new model of audit, as well as the Agency's contribution and impact on the development of Croatian higher education, and advantages and challenges experienced in the evaluation of study programmes in relation to the evaluation of higher education institutions (programme vs. institutional evaluation). ENQA expressed satisfaction with the improvements made. In October 2020, ASHE contacted ENQA with a request for a third ENQA Agency Review process, aimed at renewing ENQA and EQAR membership; EQAR was also notified of it.

Since ASHE established an integrated quality assurance system, in line with both ESG and ISO 9001, every year since 2006 the Agency undergoes an external audit of the internal quality system, which is conducted by DNV GL Adriatica. Every three years, the Agency is subject to a recertification audit for the next three-year period. The next recertification audit is scheduled for September 2021.

ASHE conducts an annual self-evaluation for internal audit. The final result of internal audit is the management assessment report, which is an input element for the external audit process carried out by DNV GL Adriatica. The outcome of an external audit is a report containing performance indicators and areas for improvement. In accordance with the recommendations for improvement, ASHE drafts plans of corrective actions and their implementation. The effectiveness of the implemented activities is proven by documented evidence during the next external audit at the latest. ASHE continuously receives highest grades in the external audit reports for the development of quality assurance system.

The synergy in the development of self-evaluation, the interaction with the external evaluation panel, the report with recommendations and the follow-up process all bring forth new development initiatives, which - in addition to the confirmation of the integrity of our work - is the greatest added value for both ASHE and the national system of higher education

10 COMPLIANCE WITH ESG (PART 2)

This chapter describes how each external evaluation procedure carried out by ASHE conforms to the ESG Part II standards.

10.1 ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

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

By conducting external evaluation procedures firmly based in ESG standards, the Agency strives to encourage higher education institutions to improve their quality in all aspects. Depending on its purpose and concept, each external evaluation procedure conducted by the Agency is in its own way focused on the ESG, Part I, as shown in Table 3 ([Annex 9](#)).

All higher education institutions in Croatia undergo the [re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#) in five-year cycles. After the first re-accreditation cycle, the [Agency analysed the conducted procedures](#). Along with the revised ESG, the results of these analyses were used in the development of a new re-accreditation procedure.

Special attention was paid to the development of standards for evaluating quality ([Standards for the evaluation of quality of universities and university constituents in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions, Standards for the evaluation of quality of polytechnics and colleges in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)) making sure that they were clear, unambiguous and development-oriented, so as to provide a good basis for the implementation of both self-evaluation and external evaluation, and to encourage further development of quality at higher education institutions.

The aspects that were particularly emphasised in the second-cycle re-accreditation standards relate to: intended learning outcomes of study programmes and their compliance with CROQF level descriptors and required competencies (ESG 1.2), evaluation of achievement of intended learning outcomes (ESG 1.3.), student-centred learning and teaching (ESG 1.3.), recognition of prior learning (ESG 1.4.), teacher qualifications and competencies for teaching, viewed more qualitatively than in the first cycle (ESG 1.5.), and student support tailored to a diverse student population and their needs (ESG 1.6.).

With regard to the application of CROQF, it is important to note that the second re-accreditation cycle includes and applies all elements of the CROQF that can be applied at this time. Essentially, this means that significant emphasis is placed on evaluating the intended learning outcomes of study programmes and their compliance with the CROQF level descriptors. Although the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act stipulates the development of occupational and qualification standards, whereby ASHE will use the qualification standards as additional information in evaluating the compliance of study programmes with qualification standards, the qualification standards have not yet been adopted, and thus could not have been applied in the re-accreditation procedures conducted so far. Once the first qualification standards are adopted, they will certainly be taken into account in the re-accreditation model.

The [initial accreditation](#) of new study programmes has for the last eight years been carried out according to the same model, and there was a need to update and further improve the model in accordance with the 2015 ESG and experience gained. We particularly wanted to encourage higher education institutions to invest more effort in the development of high-quality programmes and their implementation; the improved initial accreditation should provide better, in-depth analyses that would help higher education institutions in ensuring the quality of new study programmes.

In the procedure of initial accreditation of study programmes, special attention was paid to the development of [study programme evaluation standards](#) in line with the ESG. Initial accreditation of study programmes is carried out for programmes that are not yet delivered, but whose implementation is planned. In the development of quality standards, the emphasis was thus placed on standards related to the intended learning outcomes of the new programme, their compliance with the CROQF level descriptors and necessary competencies, and the quality and relevance of the study programme (ESG 1.2), intended methods of teaching, learning and assessment (ESG 1.3), conditions for enrolment and recognition of prior learning (ESG 1.4), conditions that ensure the achievement of intended learning outcomes (ESG 1.5 and ESG 1.6), as well as internal quality assurance of the study programme and its further development (ESG 1.1 and ESG 1.9).

With regard to the application of CROQF, it is important to note that the new model of initial accreditation applies all the elements of the CROQF that can be applied for the time being. This primarily refers to the evaluation of the intended learning outcomes of the new programme, and their compliance with the CROQF level descriptors. Once the first qualification standards are adopted, they will also be taken into account in the initial accreditation procedure.

As shown in Table 3, the procedure of [re-accreditation of doctoral studies](#) includes all the standards described in 2015 ESG, Part I.

Internal quality assurance system is the second topic that is evaluated, and it combines the evaluation of all internal procedures used for improving the quality of the system - from launching doctoral study programmes, ensuring their conformity with institutional vision and mission, as well as scientific, cultural, social and economic needs, to periodic monitoring of study programmes, supervisors, teachers and doctoral students, and procedures that lead to the successful completion of doctoral study. Within this topic, quality assurance policy is explicitly evaluated in two criteria (ESG 2.1 and 2.5). Design and approval of programmes are covered by the second and fourth topic: Programme and outcomes of doctoral study programme (2.2, 4.1 - 4.6).

Student-centred learning, teaching and student assessment are the focus of the third topic: Support to doctoral candidates and their progression, and is also present in the fourth topic: Programme and outcomes of the doctoral study programme. Criteria 3.4 and 4.7 are good examples for this.

STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING, TEACHING AND STUDENT ASSESSMENT ARE THE FOCUS OF THE THIRD TOPIC: SUPPORT TO DOCTORAL CANDIDATES AND THEIR PROGRESSION, AND IS ALSO PRESENT IN THE FOURTH TOPIC: PROGRAMME AND OUTCOMES OF THE DOCTORAL STUDY PROGRAMME.

Student admission, progression, recognition and certification are evaluated by a number of criteria within the second, third and fourth topic (2.6, 2.7, 3.6 - 3.8, 4.8). Teachers and supervisors in doctoral study programmes are included in all four topics of the re-accreditation of doctoral studies, for example, criteria 1.4, 1.5, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 4.8. Learning resources and student support is a topic that, according to the ESG, includes resources such as the library, workspace, IT equipment and human resources, i.e. teachers and supervisors, and is evaluated within the first and third topic (ESG 1.6, 3.9 and 3.10).

Information management, i.e. the procedures that follow the collection and analysis of study programme data, is evaluated under the second topic (2.3 and 2.4), as are the informing of public (2.8) and continuous monitoring and periodic review of study programmes (2.3).

A detailed insight into the current state and problems of doctoral study programmes, as an outcome of the procedure of re-accreditation of doctoral studies, will serve as a basis for later evaluations of the doctoral level of education, within the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions.

At the end of the first cycle of [audit](#), the data collected from the conducted procedures was used for a comprehensive analysis ([meta-evaluation](#)) of the entire cycle. Based on the experiences from the first cycle, stakeholder feedback and changes brought by the 2015 ESG, ASHE developed a new audit model, defined by the [Ordinance on Audit](#).

The Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education stipulates that higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia are responsible for establishing internal quality assurance systems in accordance with the ESG. Considering that Part I of the ESG (2015) asserts that policies and processes are the foundation of a coherent quality assurance system that contributes to institutional responsibility for the development of higher education, the new model of institutional audit places an additional emphasis on the process approach to internal quality assurance in higher education. The procedure of audit assesses: the extent to which HEI's processes follow a quality assurance cycle, i.e. Quality policy - Planning and management - Implementation and monitoring - Evaluation - Improvements, innovations, impact; whether HEI's internal quality assurance system is fit for purpose and coherent, and whether it adequately supports HEI's policies, strategic goals and mission, all institutional activities and the overall development of HEI (ESG 1.1 - 1.10 in all elements of evaluation); whether it encourages a continuous development of quality culture, with all the stakeholders actively participating and taking responsibility for various processes, whether it acts in accordance with ethical principles, principles of tolerance and respect of diversity, against any form of discrimination (ESG 1.1); whether it encourages adequate support to students (ESG 1.6), teaching staff (ESG 1.5) and stakeholders, development of a culture of self-evaluation at institutional level, recognition of the added value of participating in external evaluations (ESG 1.10), cooperation, and rewarding of excellence and innovation. Through audit, ASHE continuously encourages higher education institutions to establish a culture of self-evaluation by conducting internal audits in shorter (annual) cycles, with mandatory follow-up monitoring to ensure the implementation of improvements and development continuity. The aim is to encourage higher education institutions to develop as learning organisations, to establish different quality assurance mechanisms, to collect, analyse and use IQAS data (ESG 1.7) to identify risks, but also to use this as an opportunity to improve institutional processes (especially teaching, learning and student-centred evaluation, ESG 1.3.) and the overall system, and to achieve the desired level of quality.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

One of the main changes that has taken place over the past period is the development and implementation of new external evaluations models. In the procedures of re-accreditation and initial accreditation, the revised models enabled a better compliance with standards of the ESG Part I, in particular, a better application of standards related to learning outcomes and link with the CROQF, and, in general, a greater emphasis on the qualitative aspect, whereby ensuring a more detailed, in-depth approach and better, more relevant, evidence-based evaluation reports that can better serve higher education institutions in planning the necessary improvements.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

Hyperlinks in the text

10.2 ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

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

External evaluation procedures conducted by ASHE are defined by the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education. Starting from the legislative framework, the procedures are designed and elaborated in a way that they are fit for purpose and meet the set goals. Stakeholders are involved in designing and elaborating procedures, as well as in planning their improvement. Stakeholder involvement in the development and implementation of external evaluation procedures is ensured in several ways: through their participation in committees in charge of drafting procedure proposals and supporting documentation; through public review of the proposed procedures and related documentation, which are also presented to the members of the Rectors' Conference and Council of Polytechnics and College, through the implementation of pilot procedures and additional adjustments, and by providing feedback on the quality of procedures during and after the completion of each evaluation cycle. Collected feedback is used to continuously improve the quality of external evaluation procedures, especially when planning the next evaluation cycle.

All external evaluation procedures have a clear goal and purpose, and complement each other by emphasising certain quality elements of higher education institutions. Taken together, the procedures aim to encourage the overall development and improvement of quality of higher education institutions.

The basic external evaluation procedure is the **re-accreditation of higher education institutions**, which is mandatory for all higher education institutions, and is carried out in five-year cycles.

The aim of the procedure is to assess the quality of higher education institutions in line with the defined quality standards and, according to findings, recommend necessary improvements.

The purpose of the procedure is to encourage further development of quality in the main segments of HEIs' operation (study programmes, learning and teaching, student support, resources, scientific activity, etc.). Given that the second cycle of re-accreditation is underway, the procedure also used to assess whether HEIs have implemented recommendations for quality improvement from the first cycle, and to provide recommendations for further improvements that are monitored in the follow-up phase.

During the first cycle of institutional re-accreditation, a need was identified for quality improvement of postgraduate doctoral studies at the national level, so in 2014, at the request of the competent minister, the Agency launched a re-accreditation of these study programmes.

The aim of this one-off **re-accreditation of postgraduate doctoral studies** was to provide an in-depth analysis of the quality of doctoral studies, i.e. to assess the quality of these studies against specially defined quality standards that take into account specific characteristics of doctoral study programmes, and to recommend necessary improvements.

The purpose of the procedure was to encourage further quality development of doctoral studies. Given that this was a one-off procedure, which was completed in 2020 and will not be conducted in cycles, the implementation of recommendations for improvement is monitored in the follow-up stage. The procedure achieved its purpose as it encouraged significant improvements in the quality of doctoral studies; the programmes that did not meet the necessary academic quality criteria are no longer delivered.

THE SECOND CYCLE OF AUDIT IS CARRIED OUT ACCORDING TO THE NEW MODEL, IN WHICH THE DIFFERENCES IN RELATION TO THE RE-ACCREDITATION PROCEDURE ARE CLEARER, SO AS TO AVOID THE UNNECESSARY OVERLAPS BUT ALSO ENCOURAGE THE QUALITY DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS THROUGH THE SYNERGY OF TWO PROCEDURES.

In order to support higher education institutions in their development of internal quality assurance systems, ASHE conducts the procedure of **audit**, aimed at assessing whether HEI's internal quality assurance system (IQAS) is fit for purpose and coherent, and whether it adequately supports institutional mission, activities and overall development.

The purpose of audit is to encourage continuous development of IQAS and quality culture at higher education institutions. The second cycle of audit is carried out according to the new model, in which the differences in relation to the re-accreditation procedure are clearer, so as to avoid the unnecessary overlaps but also encourage the quality development of higher education institutions through the synergy of two procedures. The second cycle of audit is conducted primarily at higher education institutions that were not included in the first cycle, i.e. colleges, as these are predominantly younger institutions, with quality assurance systems that are mostly in the initial phase of development. Audit procedure encourages the institutions to take responsibility for further development of their internal quality assurance mechanisms.

Unlike the above-mentioned external evaluation procedures, **initial accreditation** is the only procedure implemented at the level of higher education institutions that are in the process of being established and/or study programmes that are not yet functional, as the Croatian law requires that licence for performing higher education activity and/or launching a new study programme is obtained before the implementation thereof.

The aim of the initial accreditation of study programmes is to assess whether the proposed programme meets the neces-

sary quality standards (in terms of the intended learning outcomes, programme content, necessary resources for programme delivery, etc.).

The purpose of this procedure is to ensure that a new programme meets the necessary standards, but also to encourage further improvements. The quality of implementation is further monitored during the follow-up stage. A new higher education institution or a new study programme, approved in the initial accreditation procedure, are subject to quality evaluation within the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions.

With regard to the application of the **Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF)**, the biggest change is that new models of re-accreditation of higher education institutions and initial accreditation of study programmes incorporate all elements of the CROQF that are currently available, in line with the ESG 1.2. This primarily relates to the fact that said procedures assess the compliance of intended learning outcomes with the CROQF level descriptors. However, in addition to the assessment of level, the CROQF Act stipulates that study programmes' compliance with qualification standards shall also be assessed within the external evaluation procedure. Since qualification standards have not yet been adopted at the national level, it has not been possible to embed this element into the accreditation procedures. Considering the difficulties with the adoption of qualification standards, the competent ministry drafted a proposal of amendments to the CROQF Act. Once these amendments are adopted, which should facilitate the process of adopting the qualification standards, ASHE will include this element into its accreditation procedures.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

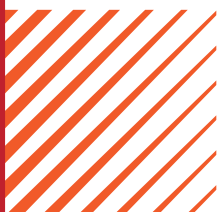
Over the past period, ASHE paid special attention to the recommendations from previous evaluations, which indicated the need for additional harmonisation of external evaluation processes in order to prevent potential overlap of procedures and put additional burden on higher education institutions.

In the light of these recommendations, ASHE has completed the process of re-accreditation of postgraduate doctoral studies, which was a one-off procedure that will not be conducted in cycles. However, the monitoring of the implementation of recommendations for improvement is still ongoing within the follow-up phase. The procedure has achieved its purpose and resulted in significant changes and improvements at the level of doctoral studies, and in general, with an introduction of a new approach in design and implementation of doctoral programmes. We can, therefore, safely say that there is no overlap with the re-accreditation of higher education institutions.

Regarding the procedures of re-accreditation of higher education institutions and audit, although both procedures are carried out at the institutional level, the new models applied in the second evaluation cycle further accentuate different purposes of these procedures, which focus on different aspects and thus complement each other. Re-accreditation assesses whether the quality standards have been fulfilled, and encourages further improvements in almost all segments of HEIs' operation, while audit is primarily focused on strengthening HEIs' internal quality assurance mechanisms, which help institutions in strengthening internal capacities for fulfilling their missions and goals.

The elements of CROQF that are currently available have been incorporated into the new models of re-accreditation and initial accreditation in a way that study programmes' compliance with the CROQF is verified. The adoption and application of qualification standards is a challenge that remains, but we expect that the amendments to the legislation will bring some degree of simplification of said standards, which will then be embedded into ASHE accreditation procedures.

Considering that the second evaluation cycle ends in two years, we are currently reflecting on the possible developments for the third cycle; in this sense, ASHE is open to a more flexible approach to external evaluation procedures, depending on the level of quality development at individual higher education institutions.



10.3 ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

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

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

All external evaluation procedures carried out by the Agency are designed and prepared, publicly reviewed, implemented and evaluated in cooperation with the stakeholders. In addition, all procedures include the submission of a self-assessment or equivalent, a site visit by an expert panel, publishing of an expert panel's report, and a follow-up.

PRODUCING SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

The process of **re-accreditation of higher education institutions** is prescribed in detail by the [Procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#). In accordance with this document, higher education institution prepares a self-evaluation report (SER) in line with the [Standards for the evaluation of quality of universities and university constituents in the procedure of re-accreditation](#) or the [Standards for the evaluation of quality of polytechnics and colleges in the procedure of re-accreditation](#). Higher education institution additionally prepares an [Analytic Supplement to the Self-Evaluation Report](#). Analytic Supplement to the Self-Evaluation Report contains tables for quantitative data. Quantitative data are entered into the information system that has been upgraded for this purpose within the SKAZVO project. Analytic Supplement is an integral part of SER. The structure of SER closely follows the Quality Standards, which explain the standards that are evaluated through individual elements, examples of indicators and evidence.

The process of initial accreditation is prescribed in detail by the [Procedure of initial accreditation of a study programme](#). In accordance with this document, higher education institution prepares the *Study programme proposal*, in accordance with the [Instructions for drafting the Study programme proposal](#). Study programme proposal should contain a self-evaluation in line with the [Standards for the evaluation of quality of study programmes in the procedure of initial accreditation](#), with supporting documents that include a description of study programme and filled-in [Table for the initial accreditation of study programmes](#), in electronic format. As in the re-accreditation of a higher education institutions, the Standards explain individual elements, and provide examples of indicators and evidence.

In the **re-accreditation of doctoral studies**, higher education institutions also prepared a self-evaluation report in line with the Self-Evaluation Template and entered quantitative data into MOZVAG. Self-Evaluation Template followed the [Re-accreditation of postgraduate university study programmes in Croatia: Principles and criteria](#), which provided explanations of the evaluation criteria

The **audit** procedure is carried out in accordance with the [Ordinance on External Audit of Quality Assurance Systems at Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia](#). The Agency also developed [Audit Manual](#) for a better preparation and implementation of the procedure. In accordance with these documents, a higher education institution submits audit documentation that includes the latest internal audit report, conducted in accordance with the ESG, the basic IQAS documentation (quality policy, IQAS regulations, manual, etc.) and additional documents. There are no specific instructions for the preparation of internal audit report, as higher education institutions are expected to shape their quality assurance systems (including the methodology of internal audit and of writing and structuring the internal audit report) according to their own profile and needs (fitness for purpose), and to appropriately define this in internal regulation.

SITE VISIT TO HEI

In the **re-accreditation of higher education institutions**, the site visit has been extended in the second cycle, and it now usually lasts five days. The meetings with stakeholders are usually organised over three days, which is preceded by a one-day preliminary meeting of the expert panel (first day), and followed by a one-day preparation of the draft final report (fifth and final day). The aim was to provide additional time for preparation of the expert panel, meetings with stakeholders, review of documentation and supporting evidence during the visit, and better draft reports. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, re-accreditation of higher education institutions was in 2020 carried out according to a hybrid model that included an online site visit, and a one-day on-site visit by a part of the expert panel.

In the **initial accreditation**, the expert panel's site visit to a higher education institution proposing a new study programme was also extended compared to the earlier practice and it usually lasts three days, which includes one day for the preparation, and half a day to one day for drafting the final report. The aim was to provide additional time for the preparation of the expert panel, review of documentation and supporting evidence, and preparation of report and analyses.

In the **re-accreditation of doctoral studies**, one day before the site visit, all expert panels participating in the site visit to higher education institutions first attended a joint training on the Croatian system of education and science, the Agency and the external evaluation procedures it conducts, the doctoral studies in the Republic of Croatia and the role of expert panels in that specific evaluation procedure. The site visit lasted one day per study programme, and included meetings with the management, the head of doctoral study programme, teachers, supervisors, research project leaders, doctoral students, alumni and external stakeholders. It also included a tour of the library, workspace dedicated to doctoral students and laboratories.

In the **audit** procedure, site visit includes a one-day preparatory meeting of the expert panel, and 2-3 days of the site visit proper, which includes meetings with various stakeholder groups, collecting of additional evidence and drafting of the report.

WRITING THE REPORT

In the **re-accreditation** procedure, the expert panel drafts a report according to the guidelines for drafting the final report ([universities and their constituents; polytechnics and colleges](#)). The final report contains detailed analysis and quality assessment for each quality standard and assessment area, as well as the recommendations for improvement. After the site visit, the panel has one month to prepare the report, which is then sent to the evaluated higher education institution for comments. The Agency submits the expert panel's final report, HEI's comments and analytics from MOZVAG database to the Accreditation Council.

In the **initial accreditation**, the expert panel drafts a report according to the [guidelines for drafting the final report](#). The report includes a detailed analysis and quality assessment for each quality standard and assessment area, as well as the recommendations for improvement. The deadline for submitting a final report is one month after the site visit. The evaluated higher education institution may submit its comments to the report. The Accreditation Council issues its opinion on the procedure outcome based on the final report and HEI's comments to the report.

In the **re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes**, the expert panels prepare their reports by using [the final report template](#), in accordance with the [Re-accreditation of postgraduate university study programmes in Croatia: Principles and criteria](#), u kojem se nalaze pojašnjenja kriterija za vrednovanje, which provides explanations of individual evaluation criteria.

In the **audit** procedure, expert panels prepare their reports within four weeks after the site visit by using the [audit report template](#), which is annexed to the [Audit Manual](#). Audit report includes the analysis of the expert panel, the assessment of development stage and effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system, by each evaluation element, and recommendations for improvement. As in other external evaluation procedures, reports are proofread and translated, and sent to the evaluated higher education institution for comments. The final report and HEI's comments are submitted to the Accreditation Council. The adopted final report is submitted HEI and published on the Agency's website. All the reports on external evaluation procedures are published on ASHE website, together with relevant decisions.

FOLLOW-UP

After the **re-accreditation**, all evaluated higher education institutions are subject to follow-up monitoring; they are required to submit an action plan within six months, and report on its implementation. In order to strengthen the follow-up procedure, the Agency established the Follow-up Committee which reviews institutional action plans and implementation reports, and submits its opinion on the quality of these documents to the Accreditation Council. In cases when a letter of expectation is issued to a re-accredited institution, the higher education institution has up to three years to resolve the main deficiencies and submit a report thereof. After reviewing the said report, the Accreditation Council may decide to implement a second site visit to the institution.

After the **initial accreditation**, all approved study programmes are subject to follow-up monitoring. Within the follow-up stage, the higher education institution submits an action plan, followed by annual reports on the implementation of an action plan until the first cohort of enrolled students graduates.

After the end of the follow-up period, as set by the Accreditation Council after the **re-accreditation of doctoral studies**, a higher education institution submits a report to ASHE, based on which the Accreditation Council determines to what extent the recommendations for improvement have been implemented. In case a confirmation on compliance is issued to the evaluated institution, the higher education institutions submits an action plan within six months on a separate form provided for that purpose. The implementation of this plan is monitored over a set five-year period. In case a letter of expectation is issued, after the deadline for implementation of recommended improvements, the Accreditation Council decides on whether a confirmation on compliance is issued or license denied, based on the evidence provided by the higher education institution in its implementation report. In this report, higher education institution follows the recommendations provided by the expert panel, explains how the recommendations have been implemented, submits evidence thereof, and provides information on future plans regarding the quality improvement of study programme.

In the **audit** procedure, the evaluated higher education institution produces and submits a 2-year action plan of improvements based on expert panel's recommendations. After a 6-months follow-up phase, HEI submits a follow-up report on the activities that have been carried out, including an analysis of their effectiveness. Based on this report, the expert panel has three weeks to draft a conclusion on the effectiveness of activities carried out during the follow-up phase. The conclusion of the expert panel is submitted to the institution, and published on ASHE website. At this stage, a final meeting is organised with the management of audited HEI, attended by one member of the expert panel and ASHE coordinator, in order to discuss the effectiveness of the follow-up activities. Two years after the final audit report is adopted, the higher education institution submits a report on the implementation of the two-year action plan, and presents its experiences at the meeting of the CroQAnet network.

In the first cycle of institutional audit, two separate audit reports were submitted to the Accreditation Council for adoption - one after the site visit, and the final report after a 6-months follow-up stage. The procedure therefore lasted 18 months, which made it difficult to collect relevant feedback on its quality. Taking into consideration the development and experiences of higher education institutions after the first cycle, audit procedure was revised and improved for the second cycle: the Accreditation Council now adopts only one audit report, after the site visit, and the follow-up phase was adjusted in order to ensure two checkpoints for monitoring the effectiveness of improvements made, as well as an opportunity to provide direct feedback to the panel.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

With the development of new models of external evaluation, especially re-accreditation and initial accreditation, these procedures have been additionally improved. In particular, the approach to drafting of self-evaluation has been improved in a way that reduces the burden on higher education institutions and provides a better structured data, submitted by higher education institutions, which is entered into the upgraded information system. This data also serves for later analyses of conducted re-accreditation procedures. ASHE also improved its support to higher education institutions in the process of drafting self-evaluation; in addition to self-evaluation workshops, the Agency organised a series of seminars and workshops on topics of common interest (learning outcomes, career centres, mobility and internationalisation, etc.). Such an approach resulted in higher quality of self-evaluations, which ought to serve higher education institutions for reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses and planning further improvements. This was confirmed by the institutions, which in their feedback assessed the self-evaluation process as very useful.

The longer site visits allowed for a larger number of meetings with different groups of external and internal stakeholders, additional time for reviewing documentation and evidence (with review of student exams, graduate theses, etc. being particularly important), better preparation of the panel and more time for internal panel meetings, during which they can exchange opinions, prepare more qualitative analyses, evaluations and draft reports. New re-accreditation standards were found to be particularly effective, as they are much clearer and more elaborate and provide information to the expert panel on what that needs to be checked in the evaluation process. A progress has also been made with the new way of grading by quality standards. All this had an impact on the quality and relevance of final reports, which contain quality assessments and recommendations that can help higher education institutions in planning the necessary improvements. One of the biggest changes relates to the follow-up monitoring, to which we placed a greater focus in the second cycle; among other things, through the establishment of a Follow-up Committee. The Committee meets regularly to review the submitted action plans and implementation reports, and - if needed - request additional information from higher education institutions. Follow-up monitoring was also introduced in the initial accreditation procedure, which did not include this element before.

With placing a greater emphasis on the follow-up phase, the aim was to ensure further improvement of higher education institutions on the basis of recommendations from external evaluations, and consequently, the improvement of the entire system of higher education. As re-accreditation and audit are carried out in five-year cycles, ASHE provides a continuous support to the evaluated higher education institutions in implementing improvements in the follow-up phase.



10.4 ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

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

COMPOSITION OF SELECTION OF EXPERT PANEL

The external evaluations are carried out by selected and appointed expert panels which, depending on the procedure, comprise three to five members (more if necessary), and always include a student representative.

The expert panels are appointed by the Accreditation Council for all procedures, according to pre-determined criteria, as defined by individual procedures: [Procedure of initial accreditation of a study programme](#), [Procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#) and [Ordinance on Audit](#).

The selection process begins with a public call, which is published on the Agency's website. Taking into account the scientific field of the evaluated higher education institution, a proposal of expert panel members is prepared based on their applications, recommendations of related agencies and direct invitation of experts from the appropriate scientific field. Before the members are appointed, the Agency checks that there is no conflict of interest with the evaluated higher education institution. The proposal of expert panel members is also submitted to the evaluated higher education institution, which can lodge a complaint to the proposal within 8 days. In this case, the Accreditation Council discusses the complaint of the higher education institution and, based on the presented arguments, decides on whether a new proposal is needed. In the **re-accreditation of higher education institutions**, expert panels consist of five or, if necessary, more members. Members include four representatives of the academic community, and one student representative. One expert from the business sector may be selected instead of one academic. In the re-accreditation of polytechnics and colleges, the panels include at least two members who teach at the level of professional studies.

In the second cycle of re-accreditation, the experts who evaluated the same higher education institution in the previous cycle were included in the expert panels whenever possible.

Although all panel members are informed of the findings, recommendations and outcomes of previous evaluations, the idea behind this is that experts who evaluated the same higher education institution in the previous re-accreditation cycle can more easily identify the changes and progress made since.

Re-accreditation procedure involves both national and international experts. While the former are acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses of the context in which they operate, the foreign experts bring fresh perspective and recommendations to the external evaluation procedures, both for the evaluated HEIs and the evaluation procedures implemented by the Agency.

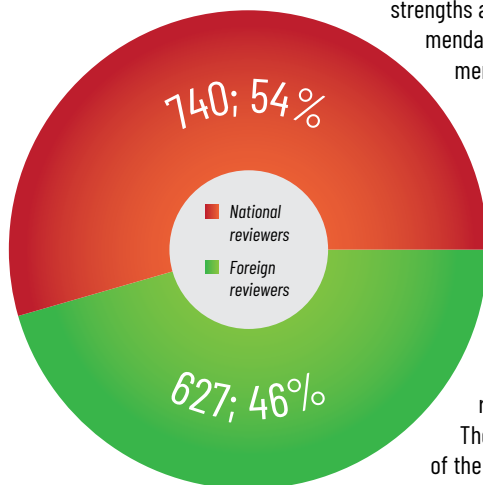


Chart 3. Distribution and number of national and foreign reviewers in ASHE database

In the **initial accreditation** of higher education institutions and/or study programmes, the panel comprises three members, one of whom is a student. One representative of the business sector may be selected instead of one academic.

In the **audit** procedure, five-member expert panels include international and national experts: one student, one representative of the business sector with knowledge and experience in quality assurance processes, and three representatives of the academic community, of which at least one is a foreign expert.

A distinctive feature of the **re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes** is that the evaluations were carried out in clusters, whereby one expert panel evaluated several study programmes in the same scientific field.

The panel, as in other cases, comprised one student (in this case a doctoral student) and four representatives of the academic community, all from the same field as the evaluated study programme, and with experience at the doctoral level of education.

ASHE keeps records of the participation of national and foreign experts (Chart 3) within its database. By their country of employment, 54% of experts are from Croatia, while 46% are from abroad. Chart 4 shows their distribution by country of employment.

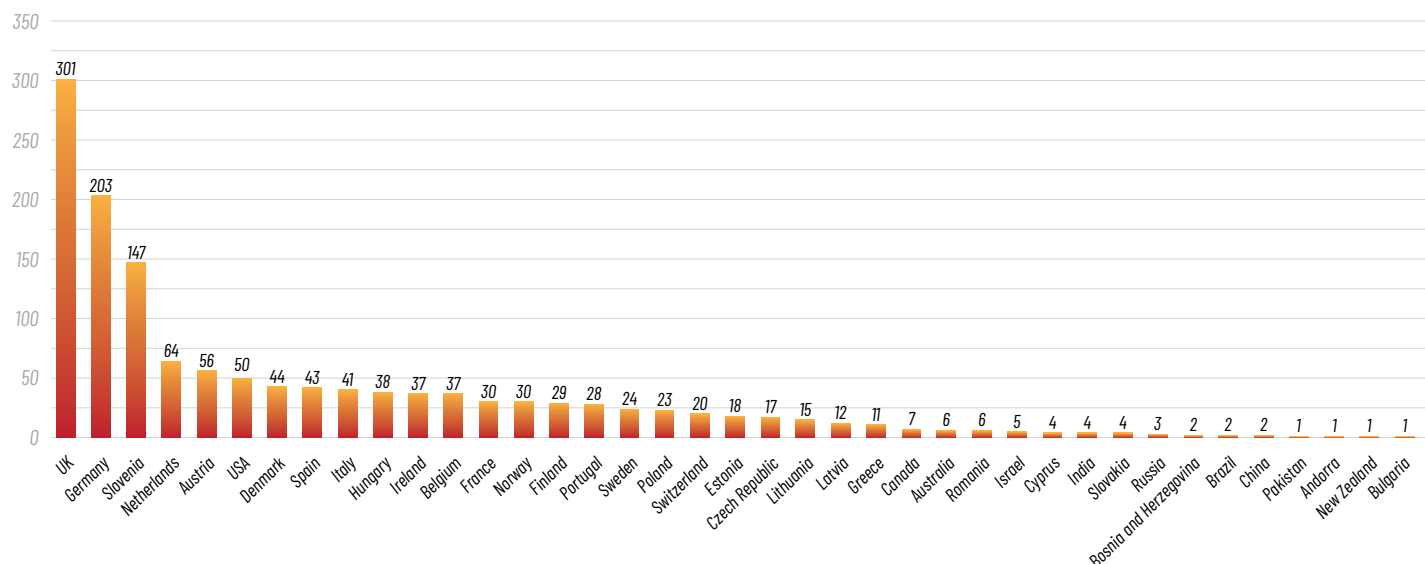


Chart 4. Number of foreign reviewers in ASHE external evaluations by country of employment

TRAINING

The Agency organises regular trainings of expert panel members.

In the of **re-accreditation of higher education institutions**, trainings of candidates for expert panels are organised once a year, and are mostly attended by representatives of the Croatian academic community and students. Upon the appointment of expert panels, all its members undergo a joint training before the site visit to the evaluated institution. The topics of this training are both general - the context of higher education, the work of the Agency and the re-accreditation procedure, and case-specific - the evaluated higher education institution and/or its study programmes.

In the **initial accreditation**, training is conducted individually, in the form of preparation for the evaluation of a particular higher education institution and/or study programme.

In **audit**, training of expert panels is conducted through a one-day seminar and workshop. In addition to the presentation of the audit procedure and ESG standards, the participants of the workshop simulate the expert panel's work during the site visit, through role play and group work. The workshops are attended by new experts, as well as those who have already participated in the first cycle of audit or some other external evaluation procedure. Seminars and workshops present an opportunity for the participants to exchange experience, knowledge, skills and different perspectives, and upgrade their competencies. Prior to the site visit to the higher education institution, the appointed expert panel meets for a preparatory meeting.

Considering that the majority of experts that were involved in the **re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes** hailed from abroad and/or were employed by foreign higher education institutions, joint training of expert panels was carried out online, through a special platform. This online part of the training was general in nature, and included information packages on the Croatian doctoral education and the procedure and criteria for re-accreditation. Just before the re-accreditation site visit, members of all the panels that were assigned different programme evaluations at the same time convened for a joint meeting where general part of the training was reiterated (national system, procedure and goal of the re-accreditation of doctoral studies), after which each individual panel prepared separately for their respective procedure. In 2020, at the start of the pandemic, the Agency organised online trainings for panel members. This approach, initially introduced due to the extraordinary development of events that required rapid action, and to which the Agency had little time to adapt to, proved to be a valuable experience for the future. Online approach to training opened up the possibility for the panel to meet several times before the site visit, and to have additional time to discuss and analyse the documentation, which has proved very useful.

In addition to trainings related to evaluation procedures in which they participate, panel members also have the opportunity to participate in other [trainings](#) organised by the Agency, to get acquainted with innovations and good practice in the field of higher education quality assurance, and to update their competencies as peer-review experts.

In the exchange of experts between sister agencies, ASHE often also recommends its own trained experts.

The Agency participated in initiatives to create joint expert databases within CEENQA and ECA networks; however, these have not yet been launched, both due to the amount of work that agencies and experts need to invest in filling in such databases, and legal and privacy policies.

At the end of each procedure, the Agency conducts a survey which, among other things, collects data on panel members' satisfaction with training, and their suggestions for improvement. Data are analysed, discussed at department/management level, and considered in the internal audit. Aggregate data are published in the annual report. Feedback is used to improve the training of expert panels.

OBJECTIVITY

Peer review is one of the foundations of an objective and purposeful external evaluation procedure. For that reason, the Agency strives to contribute to an objective implementation of external evaluation procedures in several ways.

When selecting members of an expert panel, Agency checks for possible conflicts of interest between the proposed experts and evaluated institutions. All panel members sign a [Confidentiality and Non-conflict of Interest Statement](#).

During training, the Agency instructs the panel members to be independent in their work, not to represent their institutions, and to be guided by principles of impartiality and objectivity.

With regard to the criteria for the selection of panel members, expertise is required in a particular scientific fields and topics that are the subject of evaluation, as well as experience in external evaluation procedures, both as an evaluator and the subject of an evaluation.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

Given that the external evaluation procedures carried out by the Agency are based on peer-review, the selection and preparation of an expert panel are considered particularly important.

In addition to the above-mentioned, the Agency relies significantly on its database of experts, which is updated after each procedure, and used to invite the reviewers who took part in ASHE trainings and procedures to participate in new external evaluation procedures.

The criteria for selecting reviewers may also include participation in external evaluations conducted by ASHE or some other agency, experience with internal quality assurance/management and, depending on the procedure, experience in supervising doctoral students, leading a research project, etc.

ASHE makes an effort to prepare the reviewers as thoroughly as possible for all evaluation procedures; to inform them on the national context of education and science, the specific external evaluation procedure they participate in, purpose, criteria and outcome of evaluation. We organise as many trainings as possible for potential panel members, and before the site visits, the selected panels undergo a full day of preparation and training for the procedure.

In line with the recommendations from the previous ENQA evaluation, over the past period we improved the training of panel members in initial accreditation and re-accreditation; in addition to activities organised the day before the site visit, we introduced trainings for candidate panel members during the year, placing a special focus on more interactive formats, like workshops.

The Agency sets out to include more representatives of employers in external evaluation procedures, so in addition to experts from the fields of education and science, experts from the business sector were also included in some procedures as panel members. In audit, the expert panels always include one representative of the business sector; [Ordinance on Audit](#) defines specific criteria for their selection. The re-accreditation and initial accreditation procedures involve these experts when possible, but this remains a challenge.

The Agency invests continuous effort to improve its evaluation procedures and related trainings by conducting a satisfaction survey of its experts.

10.5 ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

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

ASHE bases outcomes of external quality assurance on prearranged, clearly defined and published criteria in order to ensure the fairness, reliability and consistency of external evaluation procedures. The development and establishment of all external evaluation procedures are carried out with the active participation of stakeholders.

All models of external evaluation procedures undergo a public review process ([public discussion on the standards and procedure of initial accreditation of study programmes](#), [public discussion on standards and procedure for re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#), [public discussion on draft audit documents](#)). The results of the public review ([public discussion on standards and procedure of initial accreditation of study programmes](#), [standards and procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#), [drafts of audit documents](#)) are analysed and presented to the Accreditation Council which examines the results and decides which propositions will be accepted. The Agency tested the applicability and relevance of criteria in pilot external evaluation procedures ([re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#), [audit](#)) and after the conduction of analysis, specific improvements were made. Only then has the Accreditation Council adopted the final versions of documents that were published on ASHE's website in Croatian and English language. There are certain differences between outcomes of external evaluation procedures and in the criteria themselves in relation to the purpose and scope of the procedure, as well as differences in the manner in which the assessment is made and the decisions are reached in specific procedures.

OUTCOMES OF EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS

Different external evaluation procedures have different types of outcomes as it is explained in Chapter 6.

PUBLISHING OF QUALITY CRITERIA AND REGULATIONS FOR GRADING AND DECISION-MAKING

The evaluation criteria, methods of grading according to the evaluation criteria, and manner in which decisions are reached regarding the outcomes of external evaluation procedures are described in detail within procedures, regulations, standards, criteria and manuals, discussed with higher education institutions and evaluation panels, and published on ASHE website.

PRESENTATION OF EVALUATION CRITERIA AND TRAININGS (AT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW EVALUATION CYCLE)

At the beginning of a new evaluation cycle, new procedures, criteria and evaluation outcomes are presented to the Rectors' Conference and the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges.

Once the Accreditation Council adopts external evaluation annual plans for the following year, ASHE organises workshops intended for all higher education institutions included in the annual plan. These workshops include: an overview of the entire procedure and the presentation of evaluation criteria and their application, the formation of assessment based on collected evidence and procedure outcomes. ASHE organises specific workshops for higher education institutions that submit a request for carrying out an initial accreditation of a higher education institution / study programme.

Before an external evaluation procedure is carried out, ASHE organises an education for expert panel members that must include the explanation of criteria and their application, indicators connected to specific criteria, the manner in which evidence is collected, the assessment methods and the final outcome of the evaluation.

APPLICATION OF CRITERIA AND ENSURING CONSISTENCY IN ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES AND DECISION MAKING

Well defined, clear and unambiguous quality standards together with elements of standard and examples of evidence are one of the principal mechanisms for ensuring consistency in the assessment of quality standards made by various expert panels. In doing so, a thorough preparation of the panel, during which the focus is on understanding the quality standards and the manner in which they are assessed, is extremely important.

Moreover, throughout the external evaluation process, ASHE coordinator provides professional support to expert panel members and the coordinator of the evaluated higher education institution. This ensures that all evaluation areas are covered and that the panel consistently applies the criteria throughout all the stages of the procedure (from the analysis of the self-evaluation report, drafting of the report, collecting evidence during the site visit, discussions during internal meetings of the panel to the compilation of the final report). In doing so the coordinator, while not having any influence on the assessment, provides the necessary clarifications on the meaning of quality standards and the manner in which the assessment is made, and he/she ensures that all relevant evidence is included and that the findings and analyses correspond to the panel's assessment grades. The Accreditation Council discusses each external evaluation report and the consistency of application of criteria, and after the discussion, it reaches a decision on the evaluation outcomes. Higher education institutions have the possibility to submit comments on the report and file a complaint, including in relation to the consistency of criteria application.

Clearly defined rules making the assessment and reaching a decision have a great role in ensuring the consistency of assessment made following quality standards as well as in reaching a decision on the evaluation outcomes. In the re-accreditation procedure of higher education institutions, the so-called key standards have the greatest impact on the assessment grade for each of the five topics (within which standards are grouped). Moreover, the assessment grade awarded to each topic has an impact on the way the Accreditation Council will reach its decision and on the final outcome of the procedure. For example, if any of the assessment areas is graded as minimum level of quality, the outcome of the procedure is the issuance of a letter of expectation. Issuance of confirmation is a procedure outcome in case all topics are assessed as satisfactory or of a high level of quality. The same principle applies in the initial accreditation procedure as well; the key standards have the greatest impact on the assessment of a topic, and thus the final outcome of the procedure. In the audit procedure, if the evaluated internal quality assurance system is assessed as developed by all five evaluation elements, the Accreditation Council shall, upon the adoption of the final report, decide on the issuance of a 5-year certificate to the evaluated HEI for a developed internal quality assurance system.

FEEDBACK

Feedback collected from evaluated higher education institutions and expert panel members provides insight into the relevancy and the consistency of applied criteria and evaluation outcomes. The Agency uses the collected feedback for the improvement of educational activities and the development of criteria for new procedures. Analyses of the collected evaluation questionnaires show that improvements were made to the clarity, applicability and usefulness of quality standards, which contributes to the quality of the performed analyses on the level of fulfilment of the quality standards.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

The most significant improvements in the previous cycle were made to re-accreditation and initial accreditation procedures, in particular when it comes to better defining the quality standards based upon which the procedures are carried out, ensuring consistency in the assessment methods used by expert panels as well as to the decision-making process of the Accreditation Council.

Well defined, clear and unambiguous quality standards, which are used in the re-accreditation and initial accreditation procedures, and which include elements of standard and examples of evidence, constitute one of the principal mechanism for ensuring the consistency of assessment of quality standards made by different expert panels. In doing so, it is of great importance to prepare well the panel and to focus on the understanding of quality standards and the manner in which they are assessed. In that respect, clear rules for the assessment according to standards play a key role, as well as the manner in which the decision on the outcomes will be reached, which is defined by the re-accreditation and initial accreditation procedures. The role of the coordinator providing support to the work of the expert panel is also important in order to ensure the consistency and relevancy of assessment and the compliance of the assessed level of fulfilment of quality standards with the performed analysis.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

Standards for the evaluation of quality of universities and university constituents in the procedure of re-accreditation

Standards for the evaluation of quality of polytechnics and colleges in the procedure of re-accreditation

Procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions

Standards for the evaluation of quality of study programmes in the procedure of initial accreditation

Procedure of initial accreditation for carrying out a study programme

Ordinance on audit of quality assurance systems at higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia

Audit criteria

Audit manual

Re-accreditation of postgraduate university study programmes in Croatia: Principles and criteria

10.6 ESG 2.6 REPORTING

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

In all ASHE procedures, all expert panels' reports are published in full on the [Agency's website](#), together with their respective decisions.

All reports in **re-accreditation**, **re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes** and **audit** are published in Croatian and English. The new procedure of initial accreditation also allows for report to be published in English, in addition to Croatian.

In the procedures of **re-accreditation** and **re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes**, the Agency publishes the report, the official statement of the evaluated higher education institution on the final report, the recommendation of the Accreditation Council, and the decision of the Ministry of Science and Education. In the **audit** procedure, ASHE publishes the expert panel's final report, the official statement of the evaluated institution on the final report, and the certificate, in case one is issued.

In the previously conducted **initial accreditation** procedures, the published documents included the expert panel's report and the recommendation of the Accreditation Council. The new, revised procedure will also include the official statement of the evaluated higher education institution, as is the case in other procedures.

The access to the reports has been improved in recent years in order to make them easily available to the general public. The [Evaluation outcomes](#) menu is clearly visible on the ASHE homepage, within which the reports are arranged by higher education institutions. This way, a search by higher education institution allows access to all final reports of all evaluation procedures in which a particular higher education institution participated so far. A report search is also available by type of external evaluation. The expert panels' reports are additionally available on [the website through which the candidates select their desired study programmes](#) when enrolling via the National information system for application to higher education institutions (NISpVU).

ASHE was a partner in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) project, carried out by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which lasted from November 2017 to 31 October 2019.

The aim of the project was to develop a European database with information on external evaluation outcomes, which

would ensure an easier access to reports and decisions resulting from the evaluation of higher education institutions carried out by EQAR-registered agencies. This would also increase the transparency in quality assurance procedures in higher education in the European Higher Education Area.

An engaged participant in the project, the Agency was recognised as an example of good practice, and was included as a partner in the Enhancing the Coverage and Connectivity of QA in the EHEA through DEQAR (DEQAR CONNECT) project.

DEQAR CONNECT aims to expand this database to include agencies in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that were not previously covered by the DEQAR project, as well as to improve the use of DEQAR data. Based on the experience from the previous project, ASHE is responsible for one work package within DEQAR CONNECT, related to training and technical support to other European quality assurance agencies that wish to link their evaluation outcome databases with DEQAR.

DEQAR CONNECT is a two-year project, lasting from March 2020 to 31 December 2021.

All panel members are involved in writing of the report in all ASHE external evaluation procedures. The panels submit the reports on the pre-defined forms or templates, within the prescribed deadlines.

The final evaluation report is one of the topics covered at the workshops for potential panel members, and it is an important topic during the expert panels' preparatory meetings before the site visit. At the workshops for candidate panel members, the participants have the opportunity to work on prepared report templates. At preparatory meetings before the site visit, panel members are informed on how to draft a report, what elements should a report contain, how to organise the work on the report, and what information and documents are to be used in drafting the report.

The role of ASHE coordinator is particularly important in drafting the report. ASHE coordinator takes part in the site visit to a higher education institution together with the panel, and after the visit participates in the drafting of the final report; by providing necessary clarifications on the procedure and quality standards, and by making sure that all necessary information and evidence are included. However, the coordinator does not influence the panel's grading by quality standards. After the site visit, the coordinator maintains regular communication with the panel, making sure that all parts of the report are properly reasoned, and, if necessary, providing suggestions for improvement. This way, the coordinator has a significant role in ensuring the quality of the final report. All the reports are proofread and translated before being sent to higher education institutions.

NOTES ON RECOMMENDATIONS:

Given that external evaluation procedures are peer-review processes, although the reports are written on pre-defined templates, there are always minor differences in writing due to individual authors' different starting points and opinions. However, since the standards being evaluated contain the same elements and evidence, these differences are mostly stylistic in nature.

Additional efforts have been made over the past period to improve the quality of final reports and to further improve the availability of reports to the general public. The quality of reports is ensured by clear instructions for drafting the final report, good preparation of the expert panel, with particular emphasis on writing the report, and the role of ASHE coordinator, who participates in discussions, but does not influence the final quality assessments.

Improvements to the reports' quality are particularly evident in the re-accreditation of higher education institutions in the second cycle; reports are more comprehensive, contain detailed analyses for each quality standard, and analyses are better related to data and evidence collected from self-evaluation or interviews with stakeholders. This way, the public is provided with more in-depth information regarding the quality of individual segments of higher education institutions. The expert panels' final reports in the initial accreditation procedure are also regularly published.

Less structured parts of these reports, in which the panel list advantages, strengths, weaknesses and disadvantages, as well as the examples of good practice and recommendations, are particularly important, as they provide an insight into what expert panels from different fields of science focus on, or find desirable or less desirable in terms of quality. This can also be used for identifying the advantages and disadvantages of the national system of science and education, and for generating system-wide recommendations for improvement. After the completion of the re-accreditation of doctoral study programmes, ASHE conducted a qualitative analysis of these unstructured parts of the evaluation reports. The results were used to identify the shortcomings of the national system and recommendations for its improvement, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.4.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

Final report template in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions (universities and their constituents)

Final report template in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions (polytechnics and colleges)

Final report template in the procedure of initial accreditation

Final report template in the audit procedure

Final report template in the procedure of re-accreditation of doctoral studies

10.7 ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

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

In all external evaluation procedures conducted by ASHE, higher education institutions have the right to file a complaint. The institutions cannot file an appeal against the administrative act issued by the Ministry upon the completion of an evaluation procedure, which is based on ASHE accreditation recommendation, but may file a lawsuit before the Administrative Court.

In the re-accreditation procedure, higher education institutions may lodge a complaint to the proposed composition of the expert panel. The complaint to the composition of the expert panel needs to be substantiated, and the final decision thereof is passed by the ASHE Accreditation Council. If the Accreditation Council finds that the complaint has merit, it will appoint other members of the panel within 30 days. However, filing a complaint shall not affect set deadlines for the submission of the self-evaluation report and other documents. In addition, higher education institutions may comment on the expert panel's final report, listing remarks and clarifications that can only refer to factual inaccuracies in the report or obvious errors. HEI's official statement to the report is submitted to the Accreditation Council as one of the relevant documents for issuing ASHE accreditation recommendation. Before the accreditation recommendation is issued, opinion of the Accreditation Council is sent to the evaluated higher education institution, which has the right to file a complaint to the said opinion. Since AC's opinion is not an administrative act, HEI may file a complaint against it, but not an appeal. A complaint can be filed for substantial violations of the accreditation rules, which have or could have rendered inaccurate the opinion of the Accreditation Council. New facts or evidence that was not presented during the site visit of the expert panel cannot be presented in the complaint procedure.

The decision on the complaint shall be left to the discretion of the Complaints Committee, an expert body of the Agency. The Committee shall pass an opinion on the complaint by reviewing the entire documentation from the re-accreditation procedure in question. The Committee's opinion is submitted to the Accreditation Council for further procedure. The tasks, manner of work and rights and obligations of the members the Complaints Committee are explained in greater detail in the Rules of Procedure of the Complaints Committee. Within the second cycle of re-accreditation of higher education institutions, the Complaints Committee considered 15 filed complaints to the opinion of the Accreditation Council, 13 of which it found unsubstantiated, and two partially substantiated. For one higher education institution, the Committee requested additional explanation from the members of the expert panel on reasons behind assessments of some standards in their report, in order to provide an opinion on whether the complaint has merit.

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 is given. The final decision on the postponement is issued by the Accreditation Council.

In the initial accreditation procedure, HEI has the right to comment and file a complaint to the composition of the expert panel, as well as to comment on the final report. In the initial accreditation, HEI also has the right to file a complaint to the opinion of the Accreditation Council, in which case decision is left to the discretion of the Complaints Committee as per the Procedure of initial accreditation of a study programme and the Rules of Procedure of the Complaints Committee. It is important to note that this is the same Complaints Committee, which deals both with complaints to the opinion of the AC in the re-accreditation of higher education institution, and complaints filed within the audit procedure.

In audit, HEI has the right to comment and file a complaint to the composition of the expert panel, as well as to comment on the expert panel's final report.

If the higher education institution finds that the expert panel did not conduct the audit procedure in the manner described in the Audit Manual and the Ordinance on Audit, or is not satisfied with the audit outcome, it may lodge a complaint within 15 days of the receipt of the adopted audit report. The complaint and the complete documentation of the audit procedure shall be considered by ASHE's Complaints Committee, which shall send its opinion to the Accreditation Council for further procedure. The tasks, manner of work and rights and obligations of the members the Complaints Committee are explained in greater detail in the Rules of Procedure of the Complaints Committee. In the first audit cycle, all procedures were carried out without appeals. There were no complaints to audit procedures conducted in the second audit cycle so far.

NOTES ON ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS CYCLE:

In accordance with recommendations from the previous evaluation, ASHE established the Complaints Committee. As a standing body composed of external members, the Committee provides an opportunity for higher education institutions to lodge a complaint to the opinion of the Accreditation Council, if they deem it justified, in all external evaluation procedures - including initial accreditation, which was not the case before.

11 INFORMATION AND OPINIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS

The main ASHE's stakeholders are higher education institutions, scientific organisations, the Rectors' Conference, the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, students, the Croatian Students' Council, entrepreneurs, expert panel members, the competent ministry, the University Computing Centre (SRCE) and others. Representatives of relevant stakeholders participate in the work of various ASHE bodies. This ensures their continuous active involvement in all processes (planning, implementation, monitoring and improvement), which contributes to the enhancement of all activities, including external quality assurance activities.

The Agency regards as extremely important the opinion and satisfaction of stakeholders and as such they are continuously monitored. The monitoring of stakeholders' satisfaction with ASHE's services primarily refers to the gathering of feedback through questionnaires and direct communication. Commendations are also saved and are available to all employees.

COLLECTION OF FEEDBACK DURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW ACTIVITIES

Feedback from stakeholders is collected during the development of new external evaluation procedures. Working groups responsible for the development of new procedures, criteria and evaluation methods include, among ASHE employees, representatives of different groups of stakeholders. The analysis of feedback from stakeholders collected at the end of the previous external evaluation cycle is presented to the aforementioned stakeholders' representatives. This is one of the starting points for a discussion on the development of a new, enhanced, procedure. Proposals for each new procedure undergo a public debate, during which feedback from stakeholders is collected and commented on, analysed and presented to members of the Accreditation Council who, after the debate, decide on the acceptance of relevant proposals that contribute to the enhancement of the procedures.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROVEMENTS MADE ON THE BASIS OF STAKEHOLDERS' PROPOSALS

Some of the changes/improvements of the new re-accreditation model are: lower number of criteria that are more clearly defined and more relevant, better adaption to specific characteristics of higher education institutions (e.g. integrated universities, faculties with a high number of programmes in different scientific fields, artistic field), a greater emphasis on output parameters (learning outcomes, pass rates, completion rates, employability, etc.) and new guidelines for the drafting of self-evaluation reports that contributed to the better compliance of documents with the criteria.

In the new initial accreditation model the applicability of criteria and the clarity of guidelines for the drafting of study programme feasibility studies were improved.

In the new audit model the duration of the procedure was shortened, the certificate – if awarded – is issued after the adoption of the report, and the visit of one member of the Panel and ASHE's coordinator to the higher education institution was introduced as an additional checkpoint in the follow-up phase.

COLLECTION OF FEEDBACK DURING THE CONDUCT OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS

Throughout the year, feedback is continuously collected, by means of questionnaires, from members of expert panels and evaluated higher education institutions that participated in different types of external evaluations. The collected information is processed, analysed and discussed at department meetings. These discussions lead to improvements and the recognition of good practice, and feedback is further communicated to the management, the Accreditation Council and other bodies. Once a year, all departments submit an analysis of collected feedback from stakeholders to the Office of internal quality assurance which is responsible for the drafting of a common quality index for the whole organisation. The stakeholders' satisfaction is evaluated also during internal audits, it is an essential part of the Management Assessment Report, and it is discussed at the annual external audit and presented to members of the Management Board. Aggregated information is an integral part of ASHE's Annual Report.

The results of the questionnaire on the stakeholder satisfaction with ASHE services are presented in Chart 5.



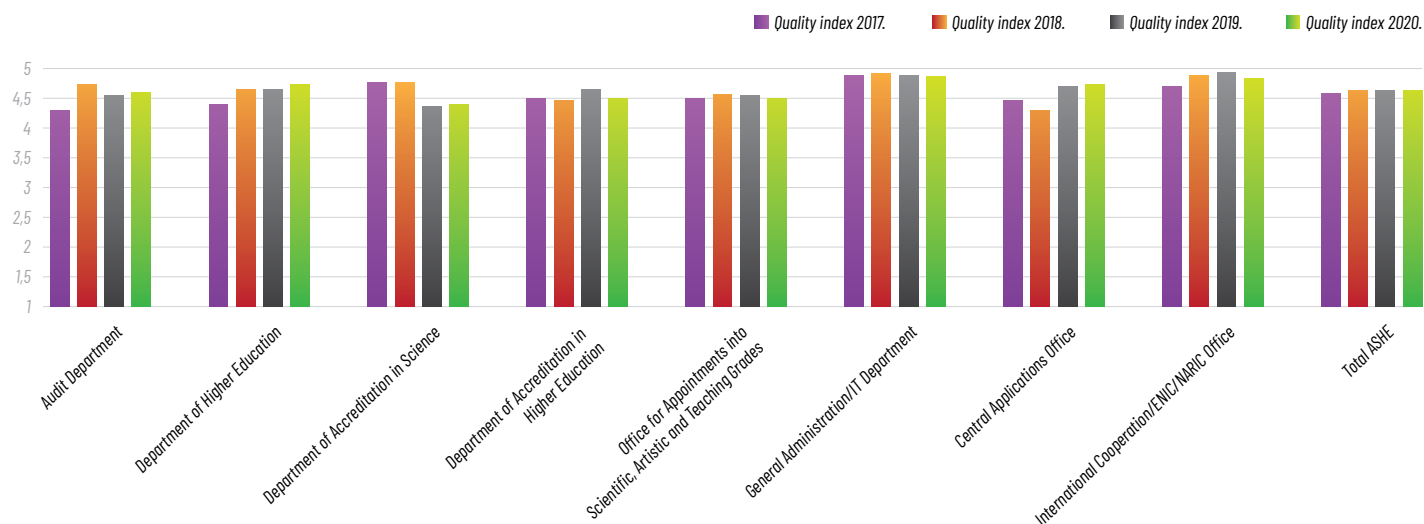


Chart 5. Overview of the client satisfaction with ASHE services expressed by quality index values with data from 2017 to 2020.

The stakeholder feedback indicates the following:

- Satisfaction with the cooperation with ASHE employees: stakeholders commended the expertise and knowledge of the quality assurance field, professionalism, courtesy, timely response, clarity and promptness in providing feedback and excellent presentation skills of ASHE employees.
- Satisfaction with ASHE's educational activities aimed at preparing higher education institutions for different external evaluation procedures: stakeholders commended the structure of the lectures and the objective and fair approach towards higher education institutions. Stakeholders showed awareness of the importance of continuous implementation of external evaluation procedures for the further development of higher education institutions and as a confirmation of the credibility of their work.
- Satisfaction of expert panel members, especially foreign members: stakeholders commended the availability of ASHE's coordinators and the support provided during the whole procedure, the quality of educational activities, the clarity of instructions and the excellent travel and visit organisation.
- Stakeholders expressed satisfaction with ASHE's website, the available up-to-date information, contacts, materials and visual identity.

After completing the second cycle of external evaluations, ASHE will collect feedback from stakeholders on their satisfaction with the conducted external evaluation procedures, the support they provided to the development of higher education institutions and changes they expect in the next development cycle. The collected information will be one of the input elements for the development of new external evaluation models as well as the further development of external quality assurance in accordance with changes in the environment.

COLLECTION OF FEEDBACK FROM CONDUCTED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Educational activities intended for different groups of stakeholders are an important part of ASHE's scope of work. Within the framework of the EU's SKAZVO project, from 2017 the Agency carried out workshops for employees at higher education institutions and students in order to provide support in segments that were assessed as needing support during the first cycle of external evaluations. Until now, during the implementation of the SKAZVO project 79 workshops have been organised with a total of 3764 participants. The topics were selected in cooperation with stakeholders on the basis of their suggestions and expressed interest. Here are some of the selected topics:

- The cycle of workshops entitled Careering is carried out by the Agency with the aim of providing support to the development of career centres at higher education institutions. Participants (career advisers, teachers at HEIs, students) rated the workshops with high grades – the average grade is 4.84. The usefulness, i.e. the possibility to apply the acquired knowledge at work, was rated by participants with the average grade 4.68. Moreover, they pointed out that, besides theoretical knowledge, the exchange of experience with other colleagues, networking and practical exercises were particularly useful. The majority expressed interest in further workshops and they suggested concrete topics based on their day-to-day experience. ASHE used the collected suggestions in the planning of further workshops and due to extremely positive feedback, the cycle of workshops Careering will be continued in 2021.
- Workshops on learning outcomes in higher education and the competence approach in planning study programmes intended for teachers in higher education proved to be successful and participants rated them with the average grade 4.77, while their usefulness was rated with the grade 4.66. Participants esti-

mated that these workshops were a good basis for creating as successful study programmes as possible; the usefulness of workshops held throughout the year, and in particular in view of the re-accreditation procedure, was emphasized. In accordance with suggestions made by participants and in order to include the largest possible number of teachers, a series of workshops on this topic were organised at higher education institutions throughout Croatia.

- Because it understands the need for a stronger involvement of students in ASHE's quality assurance procedures, but also at their home higher education institutions, the Agency organised a seminar for students that was rated with the grade 4.23, while the relevance of this topic for the higher education sector was rated by participants with the grade 4.79. Participants consider useful the information they received on quality assurance procedures and in which ways students can become drivers of change at higher education institutions. They emphasized the need to organise in future similar workshops on the topic of quality of study programmes, with a focus on practical work.
- ASHE organises workshops on the work with the upgraded MOZVAG2 and CROSB1 systems and the Project Database that are used in the re-accreditation procedure of higher education institutions. The form and the quality of these workshops were rated with the average grade 4.54, while the content of the workshop was graded with the average grade 4.56. We believe that it is very important that participants should have the possibility to take part in the discussion during workshops on the work with the reconstructed information systems, which was also recognised by the participants who rated this aspect with the grade 4.66. Due to circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 workshops for higher education institutions were held in a virtual environment for the first time, in the form of a webinar. Participants rated online workshops with slightly lower grades than workshops held face-to-face. This is particularly evident from the grade on the possibility for participants to take part in the discussion, which was in average rated with the grade 4.85, while for the online workshops this aspect was rated with the grade 4.05. We conclude therefore that participants of workshops held in the traditional manner are more satisfied with their possibility to participate in the discussion.

12 RECOMMENDATIONS AND MAIN FINDINGS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS AND ASHE FOLLOW-UP REPORT

During the last external evaluation, ENQA's Committee wrote a [report](#) containing their main findings and recommendations for improvement in the period until the next external evaluation. ASHE took into consideration all the findings and recommendations and drafted an Action plan that was submitted to ENQA and accepted by it. On the basis of the Action plan, improvements listed in [Annex 10](#) were implemented in the previous period. Special attention was paid to the implementation of improvements related to ESG standards that were evaluated as partially compliant (ESG 2.5. and 2.7.).

13 SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

- ASHE is recognised for its expertise at national and international level.
- Full membership in all relevant international professional associations.
- Equal and competent interlocutor for topics regarding the development of the higher education system at national and international level.
- Partnership and cooperative relationship with the academic and scientific community.
- Independence from higher education institutions and scientific organisations.
- Visibility – outcomes of all procedures and results of all activities are publicly available in two languages (Croatian and English).
- Professional and competent staff.
- The Management is flexible when it comes to employees' needs and open to new development ideas and their implementation in business.
- Quality educational activities in accordance with the needs of stakeholders in the higher education and science system.
- Adaptability to circumstances in the higher education and science system – development of new procedure models.
- Large pool of reviewers including international reviewers and database from the higher education and science system (MOZVAG2).
- Participation in international projects (use of EU funds).

WEAKNESSES

- Inadequate space conditions considering the size of the premises.
- Inability to establish a reward system based on performance in the public administration sector, which on the long term can affect the motivation and satisfaction of employees.
- Focus on highly specialised activities can influence the quality of cooperation and communication between departments.
- A large number of ad hoc stakeholders' requests for external evaluation procedures can disrupt the implementation pace of planned activities and have an effect on the overload of employees.
- Absence of a single internal information system.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Development of a cross-border evaluation system with the potential to increase Agency's own revenues.
- Participation in drafting supplements and amendments to key regulations and in the development of a new strategy for higher education and science.
- Reduction of costs and expansion of the activities in the context of digitalisation of business processes.
- Further professionalization of employees.
- Applications for funding from international projects intended for stakeholders in the public sector.
- New international projects.

THREATS

- Changes in business processes conditioned by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Reduction of public funding conditioned by an economic crisis.
- Absence of clear national strategic goals and guidelines, conditions for their implementation and consistent monitoring of the implementation results.
- Frequent policy changes in the higher education sector represent a threat to the work of the Agency.
- Inconsistency of public higher education and science policies.
- Legal over-regulation, ambiguities, lack of clarity and legal lacuna in the wording of regulations.
- Opening of the Croatian higher education area to foreign agencies for quality assurance in higher education.

14 CURRENT CHALLENGES AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

In the Croatian higher education and science system, ASHE is recognised as the central point for the development and implementation of various activities and procedures aiming at further developing the quality of higher education and science. Therefore the Agency, along with public policymakers, includes in its scope of work new activities such as monitoring the student employability and compliance of study programmes with the needs of the labour market, the guarantee of equal access for all to higher education, the internationalisation of higher education, i.e. a series of activities aimed at ensuring international visibility for Croatian higher education – promotion of the formation of joint studies with eminent European and international higher education institutions and the use of an European approach to external evaluation of joint studies, promotion of teaching in foreign languages, etc. In the following period, ASHE will take over the management of the [Croatian Qualifications Framework \(CROQF\) Register](#) that is being set up for the purpose of management of data on units of learning outcomes, occupational standards, qualifications standards, programmes for acquisition and validation of units of learning outcomes, programmes for acquisition of qualifications and other relevant information, so as to align and harmonise them.

Whilst developing new models of external evaluation in higher education and science and conducting cross-border external evaluations, in the following period the Agency will take on the challenge of an internal reorganisation in order to optimise its performance in accordance with new responsibilities. This will require the provision of more qualified personnel for the implementation of new activities, the alignment of existing with new activities and the provision of additional office space. Moreover, in light of the current global circumstances, ASHE will step up the work on the further digitalisation of its procedures, as well as on the already initiated enhancement of the internal business process management. ASHE will continue working on the integration of existing information systems, which will enable optimal execution of business processes, the integration and divisibility of data, as well as easier data management and reporting.

For the following five-year period, ASHE has set two general strategic goals:

1. Preservation of the relevance of external quality assurance in compliance with societal trends;
2. Enhancement of ASHE's social role as a promoter of quality of higher education and science.

In order to successfully attain its general goals, ASHE defined relevant sub-goals, i.e. strategic activities. These sub-goals concern in particular the analysis of results and outcomes of evaluation procedures carried out until now, as well as the influence of implemented improvements on the development of the higher education system. The analysis of the current state of affairs will serve as a basis for the development of a new model for the next cycle of external quality assurance in the higher education and science system. The period from 2021 to 2025 will be marked by a series of challenges brought by the process of making alliances between European universities and enhanced cross-border cooperation, as well as opportunities created by the new technological revolution. These circumstances create the need to continuously develop competences, frequently review curricula and deliver relevant lifelong learning education. For ASHE, which is registered in EQAR, this represents a chance to strengthen cross-border activities, to position itself outside the national framework and to explore the possibilities for developing new forms of quality assurance. ASHE will continue to carry out educational activities for stakeholders in the higher education and science system and to provide its expertise.

The development of a modern, independent quality assurance agency and its business processes is inextricably linked with the further development of the internal quality assurance system as well as the internal quality culture. ASHE has a long-standing experience of work in compliance with internationally agreed standards and the legislative framework, which contributes to the credibility of our work. The Agency will further improve the self-evaluation culture at the organisational level through internal audits, which in synergy with external evaluations, provide valuable information and are an additional incentive for the planned development.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Agency's accreditation recommendation – is an independent expert opinion by the Agency based on a conducted evaluation procedure, and based on which the Ministry of Science and Education decides on the outcome of the evaluation procedure.

Accreditation Council's opinion – is an expert opinion by the Accreditation Council on the expert panels' final reports following conducted external evaluation procedures, and based on which the Agency issues the accreditation recommendation.

Complaints Committee's opinion – is an opinion by the Complaints Committee on the merits of the written objection by the higher education institution to the Accreditation Council's opinion in external evaluation procedures.

Licence – is an administrative act issued by the Ministry of Science and Education on the basis of a conducted evaluation procedure, which establishes that the object of evaluation fulfils the conditions for performing higher education activity and/or carrying out a study programme.

Confirmation on the fulfilment of conditions for performing the activities or part of the activities – is a public document issued by the Ministry of Science and Education to the object of evaluation in the re-accreditation procedure, in compliance with Article 22 of the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Education.

Audit Certificate – is a certificate on the level of development and efficiency of the internal quality assurance system of the object of evaluation.

ANNEXES

Annex 1 – *Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education* (Official Gazette 123/03, 105/04, 174/04, 02/07 Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Croatia, 46/7, 45/09)

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

Annex 3 – *Statute of the Agency for Science and Higher Education*

Annex 4 – *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)

Annex 5 – *Ordinance on Conditions for Issuing Licence for Scientific Activity, Conditions for Re-accreditation of Scientific Organisations and Content of Licence* (Official Gazette 83/2010)

Annex 6 – *Accreditation Council Rules of Procedure*

Annex 7 – *Complaints Committee Rules of Procedure*

Annex 8 – *Follow-up Committee Rules of Procedure*

Annex 9 – *Table 3 Conformity of quality standards with Part I. of ESG (standard 2.1.)*

Annex 10 – *Follow-up Report*