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Zagreb, 3 January 2024

Following the provisions of Article 14 Paragraph 1 of the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science (Official Gazette, 151/22) and provisions of Article 32 Paragraph 1 Item 18 of the Statute of the Agency for Science and Higher Education (CLASS: 003-05/13-01/0001; FILE NUMBER: 355-01-23-29), at its 8th session held on 14 December 2023 the Accreditation Council adopted the following

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONDUCTING THE PROCEDURE OF INITIAL ACCREDITATION OF RESEARCH INSTITUTES

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering the provisions of the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science (Official Gazette, 151/22; hereinafter: the Act) and good European and international practices in the field of quality assurance in scientific activity, the Agency for Science and Higher Education (hereinafter: the Agency) has prepared these Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of research institute (hereinafter: the Instructions) pursuant to the provisions of Article 14, Paragraph 1 of the Act, and the provisions of Article 32, Paragraph 1, Item 18 of the Statute of the Agency for Science and Higher Education (CLASS: 003-05/13-01/0001; FILE NUMBER: 355-01-23-29).

The Instructions contain (pre-)conditions for conducting the procedure in question, and specify in detail all the stages of the procedure. The Instructions have been compiled for all research institutes which are planning to launch this procedure, as well as all the persons who are considered potential expert panel members, and for any other interested persons, and they shall be considered as the basis for a successful completion of the procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute, since they are based on a consensus among all relevant stakeholders involved in the drafting of these Instructions.

The Instructions are published on the Agency's website.

2. COMMON PROVISIONS

Initial accreditation of a research institute is a process of external evaluation of the quality of a research institute, which is conducted in the event of:

1. the establishment of a research institute;

2. a change in the status of a research institute.

The procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute shall assess compliance of the research institute with national legal criteria, national and international standards, and trends for the purpose of quality improvement of the research institute, which, among others, includes the quality of scientific, i.e. artistic and professional activities of researchers and associates and professional work of the staff working in professional services at the research institute by making recommendations for quality improvement.

The procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute shall apply to public and private research institutes, as prescribed by the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity (Official Gazette, 119/22).

In the procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute, the **Quality Standards in the procedure of initial accreditation of research institutes** (hereinafter: "Quality Standards") shall apply. The Quality Standards contain elements and quality indicators, which include compliance with the requirements prescribed by the Act.

The Quality Standards were adopted by the Accreditation Council and they were published on the website of the Agency.

The procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute shall include the following steps:

1. submitting a request and documents necessary to conduct the procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute;
2. conducting an external evaluation by an expert panel, including, inter alia, a visit to the research institute;
3. drawing up a report as a result of external evaluation;
4. adopting a decision;
5. determining and conducting a follow-up procedure.

Croatian and English shall be used in the procedure of initial accreditation of research institutes. A staff member of the Agency as a coordinator, and an interpreter or a translator, if necessary, shall provide support to the expert panel.

The periods from 15 July to 31 August, and from 24 December to 6 January, shall not be counted against the deadlines specified in the Instructions.

3. INITIATING THE PROCEDURE OF INITIAL ACCREDITATION OF A RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The research institute[1] initiates the procedure of initial accreditation of the research institute **by submitting a request for the issuance of a licence for the research institute to operate** (hereinafter: the request).

The request shall be submitted to the Agency in Croatian and English, using the form set out in Annex 1 to these Instructions, which forms an integral part hereof.

[1]Throughout this document the expression "research institute" shall refer to the institution submitting the request.

The request form is public and published on the Agency's website.

The completed request form is submitted electronically and must be signed either by a handwritten or electronic signature by the head of the research institute, and stamped. The head of the research institute guarantees that the information contained in the request is true and accurate by signing it.

In addition to the request, the research institute submits the Self-evaluation Report written in compliance with the Quality Standards and the following documents in the Croatian language, and if so requested in the request form, in the English language:

1. act of establishment of the research institute;

2. the feasibility study justifying the need to establish a public research institute / proposal justifying the status changes;

3. evidence of adequate facilities and equipment;

4. evidence of resources necessary to perform research and professional activity;

5. employment contracts which have been concluded with research staff;

6. evidence of financial resources necessary to conduct scientific activity;

7. Long-term strategic research agenda for the scientific area in which the licence to operate is sought.

In addition to the evidence mentioned above, the public research institute shall also submit an opinion of the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technological Development on the need to establish a public research institute.

Since it is the responsibility of the research institute to prove compliance with each standard contained in the Quality Standards, the research institute shall enclose additional evidence in addition to the abovementioned evidence. Additional evidence shall be provided by attaching it to the request and/or delivering it to the expert panel members, so they would have sufficient information to adopt the report in accordance with the instructions contained in the form itself. Likewise, the request contains notes about the documents to be submitted in the English language as well.

Following the receipt of the request, the Agency shall verify that the request contains all the required information and documents. The verification of the request by the Agency is purely formal and does not involve assessment of compliance of the submitted analysis with the standard itself.

If the request was duly prepared, the Agency shall proceed with the process of initial accreditation of the research institute.

If the request does not contain all the necessary and specified data and/or documentation, or if the data is insufficient to establish if the prescribed criteria have been met, or if the request is incomprehensible, the Agency shall electronically invite the research institute to remedy the deficiencies in the request within the deadline set by the Agency. The period for remedying the deficiencies in the request shall not exceed 15 days from the date of receipt of the Agency's instruction.

4. EXPERT PANEL

4.1. Composition of an expert panel

An expert panel composed of **at least five members** shall participate in the initial accreditation of a research institute.

In the case of an accreditation of a research institute, the members of the expert panel shall be appointed from among Croatian and foreign researchers holding a research position.
In the case of initial accreditation of a research institute, the expert panel shall not be composed of members who are Croatian researchers employed at a research institute who is active in the same scientific area or field.

4.2. Conditions for the election of expert panel members

Expert panel members:

- should be recognised for excellence in conducting scientific i.e. artistic and professional activity, and they should be internationally recognised;
- should be familiar with quality assurance in science;
- should have a good command of English;
- should have good oral and written communication skills;
- should be able to work in a team.

4.3. Conflict of interest

A member of the expert panel is considered to have a conflict of interest in the event of one or more of the following:

1. a panel member has signed an employment or other cooperation contract with the research

institute, or have had an employment or other cooperation contract with the research institute in the last three years;

2. a panel member is participating in publications with employees of the research institute and/or projects which this research institute is participating in or carrying out, or if they have participated in publications and/or such projects in the last three years;

3. a panel member is participating in governing, professional or advisory bodies of the research institute, or has participated in these bodies in the last three years;

4. a panel member has a personal connection to the head of the research institute, i.e. the persons performing management duties at the research institute;

5. they are involved in the ongoing court proceedings against the research institute.

A conflict of interest also exists if the abovementioned relations refer to the expert panel member's immediate family (legal spouse, first-degree relative, siblings, adoptive parent or adopted child).

4.4. Election and appointment of the expert panel members

When electing potential candidates for expert panel members, the Accreditation Council shall use:

- the internal database of reviewers maintained by the Agency;
- proposals of candidates who have answered a public call;
- recommendations of other agencies responsible for quality assurance in higher education and science;
- direct invitations addressed to potential candidates.

Potential candidates for expert panel members are required to declare whether they have a potential conflict of interest.

The expert panel shall be appointed by the Agency's Accreditation Council.

Following the appointment of the expert panel, the Agency shall submit the decision to appoint the expert panel to the research institute which is entitled to request for excluding an expert panel member within seven days from the day of submission of the decision to appoint an expert panel.

The Accreditation Council shall decide on the exclusion of an expert panel member and shall, if it considers the request for exemption justified, appoint another expert panel member.

4.5. Rights and obligations of the members of the expert panel

All expert panel members participating in the procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute:

- must be independent in their work;
- must not represent nor advocate the interests of their home institution;
- must not have a conflict of interest;
- must guarantee the confidentiality of information they have learned or obtained in the procedure of initial accreditation of the research institute.

The appointed expert panel members shall sign a non-conflict of interest and confidentiality statement, which guarantees that they do not have a conflict of interest and guarantees the confidentiality of information they have learned and/or obtained in the course of the procedure of initial accreditation of the research institute.

In the procedure of initial accreditation of a research institute, the expert panel members may not accept gifts from the research institute or give gifts to the research institute.

All expert panel members shall be bound by all the protocols, procedures and deadlines set out and agreed.

The expert panel members shall be obliged to:

1. prior to the visit, read all the documents provided by the Agency;
2. participate in the training organised by the Agency;
3. participate in the site visit to the research institute;
4. participate in all expert panel meetings;
5. participate in writing of the report, including, inter alia, participation in the grading of each quality standard and assessment area, in writing the analyses and recommendations for improvement;
6. ensure consistency of the grades given and the written analyses of standards/assessment areas throughout the report;
7. respond to the research institute's comments on the preliminary report and, if the expert panel decides so, participate in writing the final version of the report and/or explanation in case of disagreement with the claims made in the comments made by the research institute;
8. following the request of the Accreditation Council, participate in their session and provide the necessary clarifications;

9. perform other tasks related to the procedure of initial accreditation of the research institute, in accordance with the division of tasks among the expert panel members.

The expert panel chair shall be obliged to the following in addition to the abovementioned tasks:

1. coordinate the work of all members of the expert panel;
2. divide work among members of the expert panel;
3. moderate the meetings of the expert panel;
4. moderate the exit meeting with the management of the research institute;
5. ensure consistency in the grades and analyses of the standards throughout the report;
6. finalise the expert panel's report and submit it to the Agency (refers both to the preliminary and the final report);
7. moderate the meeting after receiving the comments of the research institute, reply to the comments made by the research institute, and correct and/or update the final version of the report accordingly and either send it to the Agency, or provide the Agency with an explanation on the refusal of the comments made by the research institute.

Members of the expert panel shall receive remuneration for their work, in accordance with a general act of the Agency, and to a reimbursement of travel and accommodation expenses, in accordance with an explanation given in Annex 5, which is an integral part of these Instructions.

5. SITE VISIT OF THE EXPERT PANEL

The expert panel shall visit the research institute to evaluate the quality of the research institute.

5.1. Training of the expert panel members

Prior to the visit to the research institute, the Agency shall organise training for the expert panel members.

Training shall take place online or it may be organised on the premises designated by the Agency. During the training, the expert panel members will be acquainted with their tasks and duties, the procedure and purpose of the procedure of initial accreditation of the research institute, as well as the underlying national and European regulations for conducting initial accreditation of the research institute. In the course of training, the expert panel members shall identify the main issues to be discussed and examined during the site visit and submit them to

the Agency, if they deem it necessary, draw up a list of additional documents which they wish to obtain during the visit. The list shall clearly specify the documents to be submitted in the English language as well if the panel deems it necessary for their work.

5.2. Organisation of the site visit

The Agency shall inform the research institute about the date of the site visit no less than 15 days before the site visit. Following the announcement of the site visit, the research institute shall appoint an employee to coordinate the entire procedure and notify the Agency as soon as possible. The Agency shall then arrange all other details related to the visit with the designated person.

The site visit shall take place in accordance with a planned protocol determined in agreement with the expert panel members and the research institute. The protocol draft shall be submitted to the expert panel members and the research institute at least one week before the site visit.

The obligatory part of every site visit protocol shall be meetings with the research institute's management, researchers and, if necessary, representatives of the business sector and business associates, representatives of civil society or professional associations and professional services. It is not allowed to record the meetings. The site visit includes a tour of the facilities of the research institute (for example, the researchers' offices, laboratories, the library, etc.).

During the visit, the research institute shall ensure the following:

- ensure adequate premises for all the meetings planned in the protocol;

- ensure wireless internet access;

- provide a separate room where the expert panel, an employee of the Agency providing support to the expert panel, and, if necessary, an interpreter, may have their internal meetings, breaks and may lock away any personal belongings;

- provide access to scientific activities;

- facilitate meetings and interviews with the staff selected by the expert panel, even if they were not planned in the protocol;

- provide the expert panel with access to documents governing its activities, inter alia, documents concerning staff (such as rules of procedure, agreements, employment contracts for

full-time teachers, their registration for health and pension insurance) and external associates and provide access to the information systems used by the research institute in its work;

- provide access to all premises and equipment of the research institute.

The site visit to the research institute shall conclude with a meeting with the research institute's management, where the expert panel shall inform the attendees of their observations. This meeting shall not include time for discussion regarding these observations. The expert panel shall not provide the management of the research institute with their opinion on the outcome of the procedure in question.

6. REPORT

After the site visit, the expert panel shall produce a report on the quality grade assigned to the criteria defined by the Quality Standards. All expert panel members shall participate in writing of the report. The report shall be produced using the standardised form in Annex 2 which is an integral part of these Instructions.

The report that is written in English shall be translated into Croatian, and vice versa.

6.1. Work on the final report

The expert panel's report shall be based on the materials provided by the research institute and the findings obtained during the site visit.

The expert panel members shall reach a consensus over grades for standards and assessment areas, justifications/analyses of standards and assessment areas and recommendations for improvement. If no consensus has been reached, decisions shall be brought by a majority vote of expert panel members.

If a member of the expert panel disagrees with the consensus reached over a grade for a given standard or assessment area, or if he/she disagrees with a particular part of the report, he/she may write a dissenting opinion. The dissenting opinion and justification thereof shall be submitted to the Agency. A dissenting opinion shall form an integral part of the report.

Quality grade of each standard and assessment area are also integral parts of each report. The quality grades shall determine the level of fulfilment of the Quality Standards as follows: **not fulfilled, partially fulfilled and fulfilled.**

The grade **fulfilled** implies that the research institute fully complies with the standard, or does so for the most part.

The grade **partially fulfilled** implies that some elements of the standard have been implemented, while others have not. The grade partially fulfilled may also be given if the standard is considered to have been implemented, but the manner of its implementation is lacking in efficiency and some improvements are proposed.

The grade **not fulfilled** implies that the research institute does not meet the standard in full or for the most part. A standard shall in any case be deemed not fulfilled if one of the criteria laid down by the Act has not been met.

The expert panel grades each assessment area based on the grades of standards included in an assessment area.

In grading the assessment areas, the expert panel shall adhere to the following rules:

– if any of the standards included in the area have been graded as *not fulfilled*, the grade for the whole area will be *not fulfilled* as well;

– an assessment area may be graded as *partially fulfilled* if no standard included in the area has been graded as *not fulfilled* and most of the standards included in this area have been graded as *partially fulfilled*;

– an assessment area can be graded as *fulfilled* if no standard included in the area has been graded as *not fulfilled* and most of the standards included in this area have been graded as *fulfilled*.

After grading the assessment areas, the expert panel shall provide an analysis of each standard and assessment area, and issue recommendations for improvement.

After grades have been passed for all standards and areas, and after the analyses and recommendations for improvements have been provided, the expert panel shall provide the Accreditation Council with the final recommendation on the outcome of the initial accreditation of a research institute.

The procedure may result in the following outcomes:

1. issuance of a licence to operate;
2. denial of the request for the issuance of a licence to operate.

The expert panel shall issue a final recommendation to deny the request for the issuance of a licence to operate, if any of the areas has been graded as *not fulfilled*.

If the expert panel considers that the deficiencies identified are such that they can be remedied by the research institute within 15 days, the expert panel shall not pass the final recommendation on the outcome of the conducted procedure, but shall propose to the research institute to make the necessary adjustments and/or amendments in order to remedy the deficiencies identified before issuing the final recommendation. The expert panel shall explain such a proposal and provide clear and specific requests, i.e. conditions to be met by the research institute in relation to the proposed adjustment and/or amendment.

In this case, such a report with a proposal for adjustment and/or amendment shall be submitted to the research institute, which shall, within 15 days of the date of receipt, submit the evidence of fulfilment of the request of the expert panel to the Agency in Croatian and English.

Upon receipt of the evidence of fulfilment of the expert panel request, the expert panel shall continue working on the report and shall, based on the amended documents prepare a preliminary report, and make a final recommendation on the outcome of the conducted procedure.

The chair of the expert panel shall submit the preliminary report to the Agency within 15 days after the end of the site visit, or, in the event of proposals for adjustment, within 15 days from receipt of the documentation proving that the expert panel's request has been fulfilled.

The amended and revised report which is written in English is translated into Croatian, and vice versa. In the event that the preliminary report needs to be adjusted, and there are obvious factual inaccuracies and/or inconsistencies between the grades made and the analysis of a particular standard or area, the Agency shall submit the preliminary report to all expert panel members for revision/amendment by e-mail, and provide an explanation for such request. The expert panel members shall submit the revised/amended preliminary report no later than seven days from the date of receipt of such a request.

The Agency shall submit the preliminary report in Croatian to the research institute, which shall be able to respond to it within eight days of the receipt of the preliminary report, if and only if it contains obvious factual inaccuracies and/or obvious errors in writing and/or numerical data. The comments shall be submitted to the Agency electronically, in Croatian and English, using

the form given in Annex 3, which is an integral part of the Instructions. The research institute's comments must not address the views and conclusions of the expert panel.

If the research institute does not submit comments on the preliminary report within the prescribed time frame, the report shall be considered final.

If the research institute submits comments on the preliminary report, the comments shall be submitted to the expert panel which must consider them. Insofar as it considers the corrections justified the expert panel shall correct the preliminary report in accordance with the justified claims by the research institute, but if they believe that the comments are not justified, they shall state the reasons for dismissing them.

The expert panel chair shall submit either the said justification or the amended preliminary report to the Agency within seven days from the date of receipt of the comments of the research institute.

The preliminary report submitted by the expert panel chair shall be considered the final report and shall be submitted to the research institute by the Agency. The research institute shall no longer have the right to comment on the final report.

The Agency shall submit the expert panel's final report and the comments of the research institute, or the justification of the expert panel, to the Accreditation Council.

7. ADOPTING A DECISION

7.1. Reasoned proposal of the Accreditation Council

Based on the final quality grade report, the Accreditation Council shall issue a reasoned proposal to issue a licence to operate at their session.

The Accreditation Council may, in the event that it deems necessary, require the expert panel chair, or a member mandated by the chair, to attend the session and provide necessary clarifications.

A reasoned proposal to issue a licence to operate shall be adopted within a maximum of six months following the date of submission of a duly completed request and it shall then be submitted to the research institute by the Agency.

7.2. Complaint by the research institute

The research institute may lodge a complaint with the Agency's Complaints Committee against the reasoned proposal to issue a licence within 30 days of receipt of the reasoned proposal.

The complaint shall be reasoned and accompanied by relevant evidence.

The Complaints Committee shall investigate the validity of the complaint and respond to each claim made in the complaint no later than 15 days of receipt of the complaint.

If the research institute has not lodged a complaint against the reasoned proposal for issuing/denying a licence, the reasoned proposal shall be submitted to the Agency.

7.3. Decision of the Agency

On the basis of the reasoned proposal of the Accreditation Council, and the response of the Complaints Committee if a complaint has been filed, the Agency shall take a decision to

1. issue a licence to operate;
2. deny a licence to operate.

The decision shall be issued no later than 30 days from the date of receiving a reasoned proposal or the comments of the Complaints Committee, and it shall contain the information stipulated in Article 21, Paragraph 1 of the Act and the Agency's Decision on the form and a more detailed content of the licence.

There shall be no possibility of appeal against the decision of the Agency but an administrative dispute may be initiated.

The Agency shall submit the decision to the research institute.

The Agency shall also submit the decision to issue a licence to operate to the Ministry of Science and Education.

The licence to operate may not be transferred to other physical or legal persons.

8. FOLLOW-UP

The decision to issue a licence shall also determine the follow-up procedure on the operation of the research institute to be carried out by the Follow-up Committee.

The research institute shall, within a maximum of three months from the day of issuance of the licence, adopt an action plan defining the activities, deadlines and indicators necessary to meet

the recommendations of the expert panel. The action plan shall be submitted using the form set out in Annex 4 which is an integral part of these Instructions.

The Follow-up Committee shall analyse and evaluate the activities determined in the action plan and adopt an opinion, which shall be referred to the Accreditation Council.

The research institute shall report on the performance of the activities determined in the action plan to the Agency after a period of two years.

9. PUBLIC INFORMATION

The final report, the research institute's comments and the decision to issue a licence or deny the request for issuing a licence shall be public documents, which shall be published on the Agency website.

10. FEEDBACK

Upon completion of the initial accreditation of a research institute, the Agency shall collect feedback from the research institute and the expert panel members by means of a questionnaire. Feedback is collected to improve the work of the Agency.

President of the Accreditation Council

Prof. Mirjana Hruškar, PhD

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Request form for the issuance of a licence for the research institute to operate

Annex 2: Template of the Final report on initial accreditation of the research institute

Annex 3: Research institute's comments template

Annex 4: Action plan template

Annex 5: Justification for reimbursement of travel and accommodation expenses