

**Self-Assessment Report
of The Agency for
Science and Higher
Education in
ENQA Targeted Review**

June, 2026

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1. Introduction

The Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) is the national agency responsible for external quality assurance in higher education and research in the Republic of Croatia. Guided by the principles of independence, transparency and accountability and operating in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015), the Agency has not only built a robust and methodologically sound external evaluation system in more than twenty years of its operation, but has also become a driving force behind and guardian of the quality culture in the Croatian higher education and research. Today, the Agency conducts procedures relevant to the national higher education framework, but also contributes significantly to its international visibility. This document provides a critical and comprehensive overview of the Agency's development, the current situation and the strategic direction in the context of ENQA's Targeted Review.

The basic legislative framework that regulates the activities of the Agency today consists of the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science (2022, hereinafter: The Quality Assurance Act) and the Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity (2022), which replaced the former 2009 Act. The most significant change concerns decision-making authority. Under the previous legislation, ASHE could only submit recommendations to the competent minister, whereas the Quality Assurance Act grants the Agency full authority to adopt final and legally binding decisions in all external quality assurance procedures. This has strengthened the Agency's independence and assigned it full institutional responsibility for external quality assurance in higher education and research. In addition, the Act places greater emphasis on the responsibility of higher education institutions for the quality of their own work by prescribing obligations related to internal ESG-compliant quality assurance systems, which is the conceptual foundation of the methodological approach applied by the Agency in all evaluation procedures.

The Quality Assurance Act also introduces several important developments concerning the Agency's activities. By abolishing the possibility of self-accreditation for public universities, any new or substantially revised study programme must undergo mandatory initial accreditation by the Agency, resulting in a more harmonised system with a consistent focus on quality assurance. The re-accreditation procedure remains a mandatory five-year process, and the revised standards applied since the end of 2024 now include requirements related to open science, digitalisation and student-centred learning. The system has been rationalised through the discontinuation of audits and the re-accreditation of parts of institutional activities. The Act also established the legal basis for cross-border quality assurance activities and the application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, while the creation of the Appeals and Complaints Committee and the Follow-up Committee further strengthened legal protection and accountability within the system.

In addition to its ESG-based activities, ASHE performs a number of functions reflecting its broader role within the national system. These include the evaluation of qualification standards and units of learning outcomes within the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CroQF) since 2021, as well as the activities of the national ENIC/NARIC office, which has been responsible for non-administrative recognition of foreign higher education qualifications since 2022. The Agency's organisational development has kept pace with its expanding responsibilities through a substantial increase in staffing, the digitalisation of procedures and the strengthening of its capacity to coordinate a large number of evaluations simultaneously. At the international level, registration on EQAR and membership in ENQA confirm compliance with European standards, while ASHE has established itself as a regional reference point for the development of quality assurance systems.

This Self-Assessment Report seeks to provide an overview of the multidimensional transformation that ASHE has undergone, including legislative, organisational and methodological changes, as well as the increase in international visibility. During the last two decades, the Agency has evolved from an institution whose primary task was to establish and promote a quality culture in the Croatian academic sector into a credible, methodologically advanced and institutionally strong agency, acknowledged in both the regional and European contexts as a reliable and valued partner to all stakeholders in the system: higher education institutions, students, ministries, national advisory bodies, employers and European partners. Drafted in the spirit of openness and critical self-evaluation, this Self-Assessment Report highlights not only the achievements, but also the challenges and opportunities for further improvement, in order to ensure that ASHE continues to fulfil its mission in line with the high standards of the European Higher Education Area.

2. Development of the ASHE Self-Assessment Report

For the purposes of preparing the Self-Assessment Report, the Director of the Agency appointed a committee responsible for drafting the report. The Committee included representatives of the key organisational units of ASHE, in order to ensure that all relevant areas of the Agency's work are appropriately represented and that a balanced approach was taken to the analysis of standards required to prepare the Self-Assessment Report. The following members were appointed to the Committee:

- **Irena Petrušić, PhD**
- **Mia Đikić, PhD**
- **Marina Grubišić, PhD**
- **Vesna Dodiković Jurković, PhD**
- **Sandra Bezjak, MSc**
- **Emita Blagdan, MSc**
- **Matan Čulo, MA in Political Science**
- **Mina Đorđević, MSc in Psychology**
- **Mirna Mandić, LLM, specialist in intellectual property law**

The Committee held a series of coordination meetings during which members exchanged ideas, analysed the requirements of the review, organised internal workshops and training sessions for defining the methodological framework for the preparation of the Self-Assessment Report. Based on these discussions, a detailed action plan was developed, including a timeline, allocation of responsibilities, data collection methods, and communication plan for internal and external stakeholders. The action plan was delivered to all ASHE units to ensure transparency of the process and timely involvement of all relevant stakeholders. In accordance with the action plan, drafting the Self-Assessment Report lasted from December 2025 to the end of March 2026. During April and May, consultations were conducted with internal and external stakeholders, and based on the feedback received, the final version of the Self-Assessment Report was prepared in June 2026.

The entire process of preparing the Self-Assessment Report was carried out in-house, relying on the competencies of Agency staff and on the established mechanisms of internal quality assurance. The aim was to ensure that the analysis authentically reflected the Agency's actual processes, challenges and achievements.

After the implementation of the planned activities and data collection, the Committee prepared the first draft of the Self-Assessment Report. The draft was sent to all ASHE staff, competent authorities, such as the Management Board, Accreditation Council, Appeals and Complaints Committee and Follow-up Committee, as well as to external stakeholders, including representatives of higher education institutions and other relevant organisations. They were invited to submit their comments, suggestions and amendments, in line with their role, experience and area of expertise. Finally, the Self-Assessment Report was adopted by the Management Board.

Feedback was systematically analysed, and all amendments that were relevant, feasible and aligned with the objectives of the Self-Assessment Report were incorporated into the final version of the document. This ensures that the Self-Assessment Report reflects a broad perspective, includes a variety of expert insights, and provides a complete, credible, and transparent view of the work of the Agency.

No external consultancy activities or artificial intelligence applications were used in the preparation of the Self-Assessment Report.

3. Changes since the last full review

3.1 Changes to the legislative framework

The basic legislative framework that regulates the activities of ASHE today is the [Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science](#) (2022, hereinafter: The Quality Assurance Act) and the [Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity](#) (2022), which replaced the former legal framework from 2009 and 2005. The most significant and, in principle, the most important change compared to the previous Act concerns the decision-making authority: according to the 2009 Act, ASHE was authorised to only issue recommendations to the competent minister, who retained the final authority over accreditation decisions and issued the license. Under the 2022 Quality Assurance Act, the Accreditation Council, the expert body of the Agency, makes a reasoned proposal, and the Agency adopts a final and legally binding decision to issue a license, a letter of expectation or revoke a license. ASHE thus assumed full institutional responsibility for the quality of higher education and strengthened its independence.

In addition to redefining the decision-making authority, the Quality Assurance Act also strengthened the role of higher education institutions (HEI) in the system. The institutional responsibility for quality was more strongly emphasised, the areas of internal quality assurance in accordance with Part 1 of the ESG were more clearly defined, and institutions were required to adopt an internal document regulating the quality assurance system, establish a dedicated organisational unit for internal quality assurance, and submit annual reports to the HEI management. The Act thus explicitly shifted its focus towards building and strengthening the quality culture at the institutional level, while ASHE retained the role of conducting external evaluation procedures. This approach to internal and external quality assurance is one of the key guiding principles of the methodological approach applied by the Agency in the revised evaluation procedures.

In the area of external quality assurance, the Quality Assurance Act specifies the following procedures: initial accreditation of study programmes, initial accreditation of higher education institutions and re-accreditation of higher education institutions, cross-border evaluation, and the evaluation of joint study programmes in accordance with the European Approach. In addition, the Agency carries out a range of other activities, including initial accreditation of a research institute, re-accreditation of a research institute, thematic evaluation, one-off evaluation, evaluation of the implementation of programme contracts, evaluation of qualifications, and activities related to the Croatian Qualifications Framework. One of the key novelties in the system of initial accreditation of study programmes is the removal of self-accreditation powers previously granted to public universities. In accordance with the new Quality Assurance Act, every new study programme, as well as any study programme revised to a significant extent, is subject to the mandatory initial accreditation procedure conducted by ASHE, regardless of the type and status of the higher education institution proposing it. By introducing this change, the system has been fully harmonised, and the development of a quality culture at the institutional level remains a priority, while ASHE ensures the quality of all newly introduced study programmes. Consequently, all documentation employed in study programme initial accreditation procedures was revised and updated, and has been in use since 2023. In 2024, the initial accreditation of higher education institutions was implemented for the first time as an integrated institutional procedure that, in addition to accrediting study programmes, highlights the institutional dimension of quality assurance as well.

Re-accreditation of higher education institutions remains a compulsory five-year cycle for all higher education institutions and continues to constitute the most comprehensive external evaluation procedure. The third cycle of re-accreditation, which began at the end of 2024, draws on the experience gained in previous cycles and brings methodological improvements that align the revised standards with the ESG, the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CroQF) and contemporary European higher education policy priorities. The standards integrate requirements related to open science, digitalisation of the teaching process and administration, and reinforce the emphasis on student-centred learning, learning outcomes and sustainability of institutional resources. By discontinuing the external independent periodic review of the internal quality assurance system (audit), which has not been conducted since 2024, and by cancelling the re-accreditation of part of the higher education institution's activities, the system has been rationalised and administratively simplified, while enhancing the depth of the remaining institutional procedure.

The Quality Assurance Act establishes the basic elements of external evaluation procedures, including initiating the procedure and taking a decision, the size and composition of the expert panel, follow-up procedures, and the possibility of filing an appeal. While the Act defines these elements only at a general level, their detailed regulation and practical implementation are governed by the Agency's internal regulations, thus ensuring the consistent, transparent and unambiguous implementation of procedures.

The Act also prescribes the criteria to be examined in accreditation procedures. These are primarily quantitative criteria, such as the minimum number of teachers and their teaching workload, the permitted student-teacher ratio, the availability of spatial and material resources, and other measurable requirements. These criteria constitute the regulatory framework governing the Agency's evaluation activities, while their methodological operationalisation is further specified in internal documents.

In addition to the changes related to the external evaluation procedures, the Quality Assurance Act also introduced certain changes concerning the organisational structure of the Agency, in particular regarding the composition and appointment of the Agency's management and operational bodies. Further details regarding the organisational changes are provided in the subsequent sections of the report.

Two additional innovations were introduced, significantly reinforcing both legal protection mechanisms and follow-up processes. Two new bodies were established, namely the Appeals and Complaints Committee, which ensures independent legal protection of higher education institutions in evaluation procedures, and the Follow-up Committee, which monitors the fulfilment of conditions set out in the Agency's decisions, thereby closing the accountability loop between decision-making and its implementation in practice. The Act established a clear legislative framework for the implementation of cross-border evaluations by removing legal ambiguities associated with previous cross-border evaluations and for the application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. In line with this, the Agency has so far accredited two joint doctoral programmes and issued decisions recognising the decisions of other EQAR-registered agencies for seven joint programmes, while cross-border evaluation has been conducted at the institutional level, in accordance with prevailing European practice.

In addition to activities based on the ESG, ASHE also carries out a range of activities that extend beyond its direct scope, giving the Agency a broader role within the national higher education system. In accordance with amendments to the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act and the Ordinance on the Register of the Croatian Qualifications Framework, in 2021 the Agency assumed responsibility for the evaluation of qualification standards and units of learning outcomes at the higher education levels of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CroQF). The purpose of qualification standards development is to ensure the clear and consistent translation of professional requirements into the education system, to strengthen the connection between study programmes and professions, and to provide the information necessary for determining qualification levels, scope (number of credits) and qualification profiles (learning outcomes), as well as data required for quality assurance and enhancement of qualifications. Qualification standards and units of learning outcomes are entered in the [Croatian Qualifications Framework Register](#), a public national database consisting of three sub-registers: occupational standards, qualification standards and units of learning outcomes.

The 2022 [Act on the Recognition and Evaluation of Foreign Educational Qualifications](#) introduced changes to the existing procedure for recognising foreign higher education qualifications, which since 2004 had been under the authority of the National ENIC/NARIC Office within the Agency, by establishing a non-administrative evaluation procedure resulting in the Agency issuing a non-administrative act in the form of an opinion on a foreign higher education qualification. The procedure continues to follow the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, international recommendations, good practice and internationally accepted principles facilitating mobility.

Central Applications Office (SPU), organizes and manages the national system for applications to higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia. The SPU oversees the application system for enrolment in undergraduate and integrated study programs via the "Become a Student" platform, coordinates the implementation of admission procedures, and ensures transparency and equal access for all candidates. The Office provides support to pupils, students, and higher education institutions by offering information, processing applications administratively, and verifying admission requirements. It also cooperates with educational institutions and relevant authorities to improve the quality and efficiency of the higher education admissions process.

The most recent activity, scheduled for implementation in 2026, is the evaluation of the implementation of programme contracts, a new funding instrument for public higher education institutions and research institutes, marking ASHE's entry into the domain of institutional efficiency and the management of public funding.

In addition to these changes, the Act on Higher Education and Science also introduced significant innovations in the system of management of science and higher education, especially regarding the role and functioning of the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technological Development and scientific field committees. The National Council retained its key strategic and advisory function in the system and is responsible for adopting the National University, Scientific and Artistic Criteria, which are the basis for quality assurance in the academic community. As a result, the responsibility for the administrative and professional tasks associated with the work of the National Council and the field committees was clearly defined and assigned to the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth.

In terms of institutional capacity, the organisational development of the Agency has continuously evolved in response to the growing demands associated with the increasingly complex and extensive scope of its activities. Although the Agency's workforce has grown significantly since its establishment and expert staff today cover all major functions, including methodological development, coordination of evaluation procedures, analytical activities, communication and international cooperation, ongoing challenges remain in recruiting and retaining specialists in areas where expertise is scarce, particularly in law and information technology. These areas are becoming increasingly critical in the context of rapid technological development and the need for swift adoption of new knowledge, especially in the period marked by strong expansion of artificial intelligence into quality assurance processes.

The number of evaluation procedures implemented in parallel has risen substantially, and the further advancement of digital solutions, covering processes from document submission to the implementation of evaluations, further strengthens the high degree of coordination, consistency and professional expertise. However, digital transformation also creates new expectations for staff, including advanced digital competencies, understanding of AI tools and the ability to apply them in evaluation procedures. This area represents an important potential for further enhancement.

At the international level, ASHE is an active and equal member of the European community of quality assurance agencies: EQAR registration and membership in ENQA confirm ESG compliance, while the Agency is recognised regionally as a reference point for the development of quality assurance systems. This is precisely why the further development of capacities in digitalisation and in the expertise needed for contemporary external evaluation procedures, including AI-related competences, is a logical and strategically justified enhancement area in the context of the targeted review.

This would further strengthen the Agency's ability to respond to new European trends, technological changes and the expectations of the international community.

3.2 Changes in external quality assurance activities

In accordance with the new Quality Assurance Act, the main external quality assurance activities carried out by the Agency are initial accreditation and re-accreditation, but they have been amended and improved to some extent.

Initial accreditation was also conducted under the previous Act, but a major change is that all new study programmes, as well as those substantially revised, are now subject to initial accreditation, including study programmes proposed by public universities that previously had the right to self-accreditation. The main reason for this change is that it has been established that it is necessary to continue working on strengthening the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions themselves, and the introduction of mandatory initial accreditation for all study programmes seeks to ensure the quality of all new study programmes launched at higher education institutions. After the adoption of the Quality Assurance Act, all documents used in the initial accreditation of study programmes were revised and their implementation began in 2023. In revising the documents, particular attention was paid to alignment with the new legal provisions and to preserving compliance with the ESG. By the end of 2025, 84 initial accreditations of study programmes had been conducted. Similarly, the documents used for the initial accreditation of higher education institutions were revised. This procedure includes the initial accreditation of study programmes in the manner already described, with an additional emphasis on the institutional aspect. The first such procedure was con-

ducted in 2024. The aim of this procedure is to ensure the quality of new higher education institutions that are established and the studies they propose in the process of establishment.

Re-accreditation of higher education institutions continues to be a compulsory procedure for all higher education institutions in five-year cycles. Re-accreditation is a comprehensive process in which the quality of all activities of a higher education institution is evaluated, and its goal is to permanently encourage the development and improvement of the quality of higher education institutions. At the time of the adoption of the new Act, the Agency was completing the second cycle of re-accreditation and, based on the experience gained, started preparing for the third cycle, ensuring that all documents were aligned with the new legal provisions and remained compliant with the ESG. The implementation of the third cycle of re-accreditation began at the end of 2024.

An important change brought about by the new Quality Assurance Act relates to the implementation of **cross-border evaluations**. The Act provided a clear legislative framework for conducting evaluations abroad. Following the preparation and adoption of the documents governing the implementation of cross-border evaluations, the Agency conducted, in accordance with these documents, the evaluation of one foreign university, while the further implementation of cross-border evaluations remains aligned with the Agency's strategic orientation.

It should also be noted that the new Quality Assurance Act enabled the implementation of the **European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes**. If the consortium proposing a joint programme selects the Croatian Agency, it conducts the procedure in accordance with the procedures and standards defined in the European Approach. If the consortium selects another agency registered in EQAR and the decision of that agency is positive, the Croatian Agency issues a decision on the recognition of the other agency's decision together with a license for delivering the joint programme. According to the new Quality Assurance Act and the European Approach, the Agency has so far accredited two joint doctoral programmes and recognised the decisions of other agencies for seven joint programmes.

The new Quality Assurance Act also introduced changes concerning two former external evaluation procedures that are no longer conducted. One of these procedures was the external independent periodic review of the internal quality assurance system (audit), which was discontinued in 2024. As it was a procedure conducted at the institutional level, similar to re-accreditation, the decision was made to retain re-accreditation as the only institutional evaluation procedure in order to reduce the administrative burden, while placing a much stronger emphasis on the maturity of the higher education institution's internal quality assurance system during re-accreditation. The second discontinued procedure was the re-accreditation of part of the activities of the higher education institution, within which all doctoral programmes were evaluated. These programmes are now evaluated within the re-accreditation procedure of the higher education institution as a whole.

3.3 Changes related to the activities outside the ESG framework

[Initial accreditation of research institutes](#)

The 2022 Quality Assurance Act introduced several changes related to the quality assurance and enhancement of research institutes. At the level of internal quality assurance and enhancement, the Quality Assurance Act obliges research institutes to establish and develop dedicated units for quality assurance and improvement, with systematic monitoring of the implementation of the development strategy, implementation of internal quality assurance and enhancement procedures, and monitoring the performance of all staff members and institutional activities.

In addition to the re-accreditation of research institutes conducted every five years, the Agency now also conducts the procedure of initial accreditation of research institutes, which is conducted when a new research institute is established or when an existing institute undergoes a status-related change.

Re-accreditation of research institutes includes follow-up procedures, both in the case of issuing a letter of expectations and in the case of issuing a license, which further strengthens the system of continuous monitoring and improvement of the quality of their work.

Thematic evaluation

Thematic evaluation represents a form of analytical assessment focusing on a particular cross-cutting area of the higher education and research system, regardless of individual institutions. The Quality Assurance Act defines the basic elements of the implementation of these procedures, including the manner of initiating the procedure, the composition of the expert panel, the manner of evaluation and subsequent follow-up of recommendations. Detailed methodology and operational steps are elaborated in the Agency's internal documents. Thematic evaluations enable the identification of system-wide challenges, the comparison of practices across institutions, and the development of recommendations that contribute to quality enhancement at the system level. Thematic evaluations, as conducted by the Agency, are not cyclical, do not have predefined standards or methodology, and do not focus on individual institutions or study programmes.

One-off evaluation

The Quality Assurance Act prescribes the framework for initiating one-off evaluations, and the internal acts of the Agency additionally operationalise the procedure, define the manner of collecting evidence, communication with the institution and deadlines. One-off evaluations are considered ad hoc procedures that are initiated exclusively on request and do not have a predetermined methodology, standards, subject or object of evaluation. Although their outcomes may serve as a basis for initiating the accreditation procedure, they are primarily analytical and intervention-oriented and are considered to be entirely outside the scope of the ESG.

Evaluation of the implementation of programme contracts

The programme contracts are a multi-annual funding instrument for public higher education institutions and research institutes in the Republic of Croatia. They are concluded between the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth and an individual public higher education institution or a public research institute for a specific programme period (four years) and define strategic and specific objectives to be achieved by the institution, as well as measurable implementation indicators. The Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity stipulates that the programme contracts regulate the multi-annual funding of a public higher education institution or a public research institute from the state budget and that the contract includes a basic, development and implementation budget component, which are determined during the negotiation procedure. A comprehensive framework for concluding, implementing, and monitoring programme contracts is prescribed by the Regulation on Programme Funding of Public Higher Education Institutions and Public Research Institutes in the Republic of Croatia, which defines the content of such contracts, the negotiation and conclusion procedures, and the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating their implementation. The Agency plays a key role in the framework for monitoring the implementation of programme contracts by assessing the achievement of activities and measurable indicators specified in the contracts two years after they have been signed and again at the end of the contract period.

Implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework

Since 2021, ASHE has participated in the implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CroQF) principles together with other relevant institutions and bodies. Under the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act (Official Gazette 22/13, 41/16, 64/18, 47/20, 20/21) and the Ordinance on the Croatian Qualifications Framework Register, ASHE is responsible for:

- administrative and expert support for the work of sectoral councils
- adopting decisions on the addition to the Sub-register of qualification standards and the Sub-register of units of learning outcomes (at level 5, in the part related to higher education, and levels 6; SC 6; level 7.1; 7.1.SC; 7.2; 8.1; 8.2) within the CroQF Register and the maintenance of the sub-registers
- monitoring the implementation and development of the national qualification frameworks of other countries
- monitoring and analysing the application and development of qualification frameworks in the educational policies of other countries
- establishing sectoral councils.

The [Croatian Qualifications Framework Register](#) is a national database in which [occupational standards are entered and linked with qualification standards](#) through units of competencies and units of learning outcomes.

3.4 Changes in the organisation and governance structure of the Agency

The Quality Assurance Act also introduced changes to the Agency's organisational structure, particularly regarding the composition and methods of appointment of the Agency's governing and working bodies, as well as some minor changes to their responsibilities.

The Agency for Science and Higher Education is governed by the [Management Board](#), which has nine members. The Government of the Republic of Croatia appoints eight members (one member is proposed by the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technological Development, three members are proposed by the Rector's Conference of the Republic of Croatia, two members are proposed by the Council of the Polytechnics of the Republic of Croatia, and two members are proposed by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth). The ninth member of the Management Board is the representative of the Agency's staff and is appointed and relieved of duty by the Agency's Workers' Council.

The [Accreditation Council](#) is appointed through an open public call procedure and is dismissed by the Agency's Management Board. It is composed of 13 members: six full professors or full professors with tenure, two scientific advisers or scientific advisers with tenure, two teachers elected to the position of professor of professional studies or professor of professional studies with tenure, one full-time student of university studies, one full-time student of professional studies, and one representative of the business sector.

The [Appeals and Complaints Committee](#) has seven members who are appointed and dismissed by the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technological Development from among full professors or professors with tenure. At least two members must be legal experts, one member must be a professor of professional studies, and one member must be a full-time student.

The [Follow-up Committee](#) is composed of seven members appointed by the Accreditation Council, and one of these members (the Committee Chair) also sits on the Accreditation Council.

Figure 1: Comparative overview of changes related to ASHE governing and operational bodies under the new Act on QA in HE and Science compared to the previous legislative framework

ASHE governing or operational body	Status under the previous legal framework	Status under the current legal framework
Governing Board	ASHE Governing Board consists of a Chair and eight members appointed for a four-year term. Candidates are nominated by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the Rectors' Conference, the Council of Universities of Applied Sciences, the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development, and the Croatian Student Union. The Chair and seven members of the Governing Board are appointed by the Croatian Parliament, while one member is appointed by ASHE from among its employees.	ASHE is governed by a Governing Board consisting of nine members. Eight members are appointed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia (one member upon the proposal of the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technological Development, three members upon the proposal of the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Croatia, two members upon the proposal of the Council of Universities of Applied Sciences, and two members upon the proposal of the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth). The ninth member of the Governing Board is a representative of ASHE employees and is appointed and dismissed by ASHE Workers' Council. The Chair and members of the Governing Board are appointed for a term of four years. The members of the Governing Board, including its Chair, may be dismissed by a decision of the Government of the Republic of Croatia. Early dismissal is possible if a member: • requests dismissal; • fails to perform their duties; • loses the capacity to perform their duties; or • through their actions compromises the reputation of the office they hold.

Accreditation Council	The Accreditation Council consists of 11 permanent members appointed by the Governing Board for a four-year term. Members of the Council are nominated by the following bodies: the Rectors' Conference, the Council of Universities and Applied Sciences, the Croatian Chamber of Economy, the Croatian Student Union, the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development, scientific institutes, and the academic community through a public call for applications. Associate members are appointed by a decision of the Accreditation Council upon the proposal of the Director and do not have voting rights. The Accreditation Council has two associate members, one of whom is from abroad (Slovenia).	The Accreditation Council is appointed and dismissed by ASHE Governing Board for a four-year term. The Council consists of 13 members. Six members are appointed by the Governing Board from among full professors or tenured full professors, and two members from among senior research advisors or tenured senior research advisors. One member is appointed from among full-time university students and one from among full-time professional study students, through a procedure initiated by a public call and based on proposals from the National Council, the Rectors' Conference, higher education institutions, and scientific institutes. Two members of the Accreditation Council are appointed by the Governing Board from among teachers holding the position of professor of professional studies or tenured professor of professional studies, upon the proposal of the Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences. One member is appointed from among representatives of the business sector, upon the proposal of representative employers' associations. The following persons may not be appointed as members of the Accreditation Council: a rector, vice-rector, dean, vice-dean, director of a scientific institute, deputy director or assistant director of a scientific institute, founder or head of the founding body of a higher education institution or scientific institute, as well as the owner of a private higher education institution or the head or owner of the legal entity that founded a private higher education institution. The members of the Accreditation Council elect the Chair of the Accreditation Council from among themselves.
Appeals and Complaints Committee	The Appeals and Complaints Committee consists of three members and their deputies. They are appointed by the Governing Board for a term of three years, upon the proposal of the Rectors' Conference and the Council of Universities of Applied Sciences. In performing their duties, members of the Appeals and Complaints Committee act independently, do not represent their home institutions, and must not have any conflict of interest.	The Appeals and Complaints Committee consists of seven members appointed and dismissed by the National Council from among full professors or tenured full professors. At least two members of the Committee must be legal experts, one member must be a professor of professional studies, and one member must be a full-time student. Members of the Committee are appointed for a four-year term. A member of the Appeals and Complaints Committee may not be a rector, vice-rector, dean, vice-dean, director of a scientific institute, deputy director or assistant director of a scientific institute, nor a founder or head of the founding body of a higher education institution or scientific institute. The members of the Appeals and Complaints Committee elect the Chair of the Complaints Committee from among themselves.
Follow-up Committee	The Committee consists of seven members. The members are appointed by the Accreditation Council for a four-year term. One member, who also serves as the Chair of the Committee, is appointed from among the members of the Accreditation Council.	The Follow-up Committee consists of seven members appointed by the Accreditation Council for a four-year term. One member is appointed from among the members of the Accreditation Council and also serves as the Chair of the Committee. Six members are appointed following a public call, of whom five are selected from among teachers or researchers, and one from among full-time students.

In addition to the changes in the new legislative framework for quality assurance, the organisational structure of the Agency has been revised (see attached organisational chart) in accordance with the general legislative framework governing public sector posts and salaries in the Republic of Croatia.

Furthermore, the new Quality Assurance Act also prescribes provisions relating to the Director of the Agency. Under those provisions, the Director is appointed for a term of four years and is relieved from office by the Management Board. The Director is appointed in the procedure initiated by the public competition. The conditions for appointment and the procedure for appointing and relieving the Director from office are regulated by the [Statute of the Agency](#).

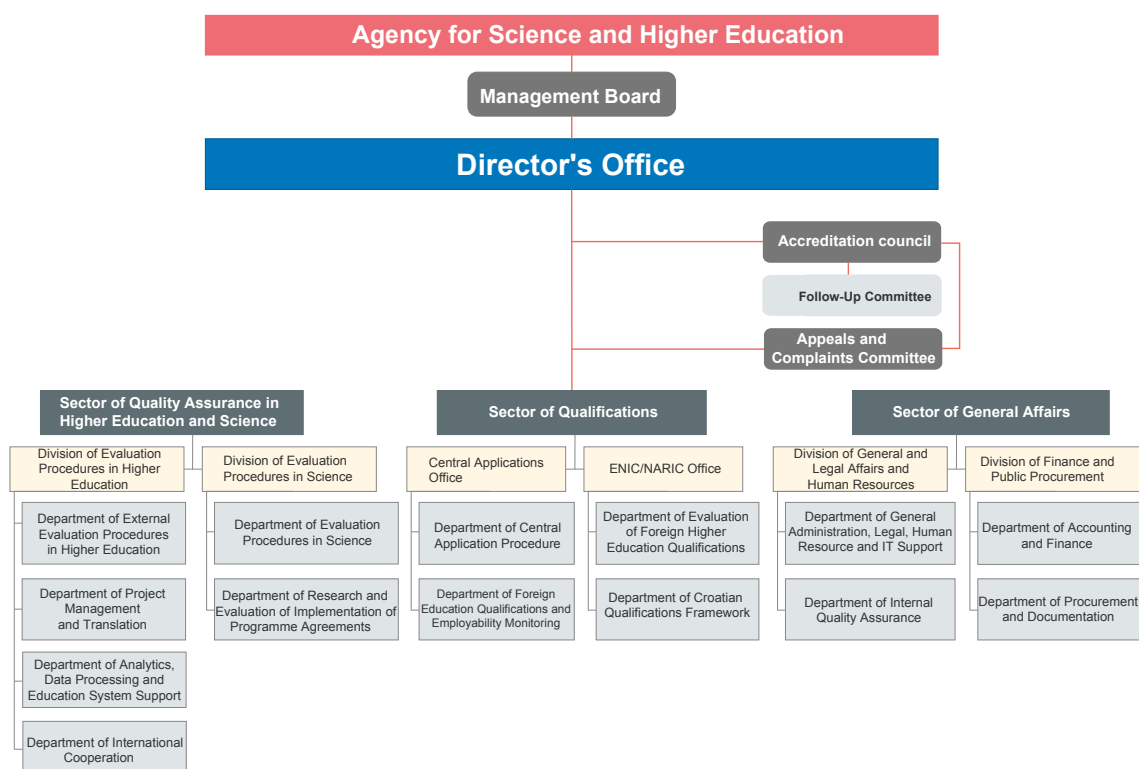
In accordance with the Quality Assurance Act, the Director of the Agency:

1. organises the work and operations of the Agency
2. represents and acts on behalf of the Agency
3. proposes the adoption of general acts to the Management Board
4. independently carries out legal action in the name and on behalf of the Agency up to the amount set by the Agency's Statute
5. proposes deputy and assistant directors of the Agency to the Management Board
6. proposes the annual activity plan of the Agency to the Management Board
7. proposes the annual financial plan of the Agency to the Management Board
8. submits an annual report on the work of the Agency to the Management Board
9. participates in the activities of the Management Board without decision-making rights
10. performs activities in accordance with the Act and the Statute of the Agency.

In 2023, the Management Board appointed Prof. Danijela Horvatek Tomić, PhD.

The legislative changes described above, which affected the Agency's functioning and activities, also required modifications to its organisational setup. As a result, the Agency's Management Board adopted a new organisational structure in 2024, aligning it with the Regulation on Job Titles, Conditions for Appointment and Salary Coefficients in Public Services, which entered into force in the same year. The current structure of the Agency is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 2: Internal structure of the Agency for Science and Higher Education



3.5 Review of the implemented changes and future plans

A range of reforms that have directly contributed to reinforcing the quality culture in Croatian higher education and research have also shaped the development of ASHE. Assuming full responsibility for accreditation decisions has provided ASHE with a level of institutional independence enabling more coherent, transparent, and professionally substantiated implementation of external quality assurance processes. The Act also placed considerable emphasis on the responsibility of higher education institutions for developing their own internal quality systems, thereby providing a supportive framework for fostering a mature and sustainable quality culture at the institutional level. By adopting this approach, the Agency has been able to place greater emphasis on the strategic and developmental aspects of its procedures, rather than on formal compliance alone.

Legislative changes have also had a positive impact on the organisational development of the Agency. By increasing staff numbers, modernising its internal organisational structure, and professionalising its work processes, the Agency has strengthened its ability to respond to the growing scope and complexity of its procedures. A responsible, professional and stable working environment has been established, while the digitalisation of procedures has further improved the efficiency and consistency of work. Today, the Agency is organisationally stronger, methodologically more mature and better equipped to conduct demanding external evaluation procedures.

The new legal framework has also brought certain challenges. The extension of Agency's responsibilities and the introduction of new procedures, such as initial accreditation, re-accreditation, qualification evaluations, activities linked to the CroQF, and the future evaluation of programme contracts, have significantly increased the number of procedures the Agency must implement. This has increased the administrative and operational burden, both for the Agency and for higher education institutions. While process digitalisation has alleviated some of the burden, the scope of work remains challenging in terms of sustainable resource planning, even workload distribution, and long-term system stability.

Despite these challenges, the Agency recognizes that changes have created a solid foundation for further quality improvement in higher education and research. These changes have facilitated the professionalisation and empowerment of the Agency, fostered the development of internal quality systems at higher education institutions, and set clear standards for all stakeholders. At the same time, the growing workload and administrative demands remain an issue that requires continuous monitoring, adaptation, and strategic governance to ensure the future sustainability and high quality of the Agency's work.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- new legal framework (2022) that strengthens the independence of the Agency, with a particular focus on final and legally binding accreditation decisions
- discontinuation of self-accreditation rights of public universities in the procedures of initial accreditation of studies – uniform criteria for all higher education institutions
- extension of the Agency's remit – evaluation of programme contracts, implementation of the CroQF evaluation
- rationalisation of the external evaluation system – abolition of certain procedures and introduction of a comprehensive re-accreditation procedure
- clear legal framework for cross-border evaluations and joint studies enabling the application of the European Approach
- new mechanisms for legal protection and follow-up, with clearly defined tasks of the Appeals and Complaints Committee and the Follow-up Committee
- organisational reinforcement of the Agency through increased staffing and modernisation of its organisational structure in line with the increased workload
- digitalisation of operations and modernisation of information systems
- ASHE has strengthened its international position and has become recognised as a regionally influential agency

Challenges

- significant increase in workload and administrative burden
- need to balance the ESG and non-ESG activities in operational terms
- ensuring both procedural and operational efficiency across different external evaluation procedures
- sustainable resource management, including further digitalisation of processes
- application of qualification standards (CroQF standards) in accreditation procedures, given that the number of adopted qualification standards registered in the CroQF Register remains low
- further development of quality assurance standards for the next cycle of external evaluations taking into account that the standards address all changes that will be adopted in ESG part I.

4. Compliance with Part 3 of the ESG

4.1. ESG Standard 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

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

Figure 3: Overview of conducted external evaluation procedures by evaluation type

Activity	2022	2023	2024	2025
Initial accreditation of studies *	8	10	33	41
Initial accreditation of higher education institutions	0	2	1	1
Re-accreditation of higher education institutions (3rd cycle)	0	0	23	30
Re-accreditation of higher education institutions (2nd cycle)	15	0	0	0
Cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions	0	0	0	1
Accreditation of joint programmes **	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	23	12	58	74

* During the 2022 – 2025 period ASHE carried out initial accreditation of 92 studies, of which 72 were granted a licence, while 20 studies were denied a licence

** During the 2022 – 2025 period ASHE carried out accreditation of 2 joint programmes, of which 1 was granted a licence, while 1 programme was denied a licence

The Agency regularly conducts external quality assurance procedures in accordance with the procedures and methodologies aligned with the provisions of Part 2 of the ESG. ESG-related activities include external evaluation procedures for higher education institutions and study programmes, such as initial accreditation of studies and institutions and re-accreditation of higher education institutions. The Agency also conducts other activities defined by the legal framework, which are outside the scope of the ESG, such as thematic evaluations, one-off evaluation, initial accreditation of a research institute, re-accreditation of a research institute and other procedures that contribute to quality improvement in higher education and research.

External quality assurance procedures according to the ESG are conducted in clearly defined five-year cycles and deadlines in accordance with the existing legal framework. They are based on predefined criteria, methodologies created and monitored in cooperation with stakeholders, and transparent, publicly available procedures. The procedures involve independent international and national expert panels, and the process, which is conducted in English with translation into Croatian, includes an analysis of the submitted documentation, a site visit, interviews with relevant stakeholders, and the preparation of a report assessing the degree of compliance with the standards and providing recommendations for improvement. Evaluation methodologies are regularly improved, taking into account the development of the European quality assurance framework, recommendations from previous external evaluations, and stakeholder feedback. In this way, the Agency ensures the continuous implementation of external quality assurance activities and contributes to the development of a quality culture and compliance of higher education systems with European standards and guidelines. Where appropriate, the Agency applies the same principles to other procedures stipulated by law that are not classified as ESG activities.

The Agency conducts external quality assurance activities in line with its [mission](#), the relevant legal framework and ESG standards. Clear objectives for external evaluation procedures are established in the documentation for re-accreditation and initial study programme accreditation procedures, which assess the quality of higher education institutions and study programmes, the effectiveness of internal quality assurance systems, and compliance with ESG Standards, national legislation, and the strategic priorities of higher education. The international dimension of the Agency's work in external evaluation procedures, as defined by the mission, is ensured by engaging international experts, conducting international evaluation procedures, and accrediting joint study programmes, thereby strengthening the international comparability and credibility of Croatian higher education.

The Agency's strategic orientation is defined in multiannual planning documents, including the Strategy of the Agency for Science and Higher Education 2026–2030, which identifies priorities, objectives and performance indicators. The Strategy was developed in 2025 through a collaborative process involving staff, management and the Agency's Management Board, while also taking into account feedback from external stakeholders. Particular emphasis has been placed on thematic areas identified as key future priorities for the Agency. These include strengthening and modernising the external quality assurance system to ensure that it remains effective, flexible and responsive to developments in higher education and research; enhancing the relevance, impact and alignment of quality assurance activities with national and European policy objectives; promoting transparency in evaluation procedures and the representation of diverse stakeholder perspectives; and ensuring the long-term sustainability, stability and resilience of the quality assurance system.

The implementation of these strategic objectives is guided by principles that are essential to the Agency's identity at both the national and international levels: independence and accountability, transparency and professionalism, expertise and professional development, quality and continuous enhancement, and inclusiveness and cooperation.

ASHE implements its Strategy in everyday operations by translating strategic goals into annual action plans (developed by the management, employees and accepted by the Governing Board) that define specific activities, responsibilities, timelines, and performance indicators.

Progress of the action plans, or of the strategy in general, is done through annual reports, allowing management to track annual implementation and address any challenges on time. Annual reports are produced by all involved internal stakeholders, accepted by the Governing Board and presented to the Parliament Board.

Stakeholder inclusion

The Agency systematically engages stakeholders through the organisation of and participation in various activities. Events such as workshops, conferences, and professional events serve as a platform for providing information about current initiatives, exchanging good practices, and discussing challenges and future developments in the field of quality assurance in higher education. Workshops often focus on specific topics, such as the application of quality standards, the development of study programmes, or the implementation of evaluation procedures, enabling stakeholders to actively participate in improving the system.

The Agency also conducts public consultations on key documents, ordinances, and strategic initiatives. Through public consultation procedures, the interested public may submit opinions, proposals, and comments that are considered in the process of decision-making and drafting new documents.

Through ongoing dialogue and the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in various forms of cooperation, the Agency encourages a shared understanding of quality assurance goals, strengthens confidence between institutions and regulatory bodies, and supports the development of a quality culture in higher education.

The Agency ensures the structured involvement of stakeholders in the planning, development, and implementation of its activities through a combination of institutionalised participation mechanisms and advisory activities. Representatives of higher education institutions, students, public bodies responsible for higher education, and, when relevant, representatives of professional sectors and the wider expert community are involved in the Agency's operational processes.

The Agency ensures structured and appropriate stakeholder participation across its activities in a variety of ways. Its stakeholders include higher education institutions, the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technological Development, the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Croatia, the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges of Applied Sciences of the Republic of Croatia, the Croatian Student Union, representatives of the business sector, representative employers' associations, and the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth.

Given its institutional position in the national quality assurance system, the Agency acts as a focal point for connecting different stakeholder groups. Inclusion is achieved through formal governance and advisory structures, participation in external evaluation procedures, and through various forms of consultation and expert discussion.

Systematic involvement of stakeholders in the Agency's management and operation

Stakeholders are systematically involved in the management and development of the Agency's activities through their representation in its management and advisory bodies.

The Management Board of the Agency includes representatives of key institutions from higher education and research, including representatives of the National Council for Higher Education, Science and Technological Development, the Rector's Conference of the Republic of Croatia, the Council of Polytechnics of the Republic of Croatia and the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, as well as representatives of the Agency's staff. The composition and responsibilities of the Management Board are defined by the relevant legislation and subordinate regulations governing the work of the Agency.

The diversity of stakeholders has been further strengthened through the composition of the Accreditation Council, which, in addition to representatives of higher education institutions offering professional and university studies, research institutes, and the business sector, also includes two student representatives from university and professional study programmes. This ensures that the Council's work incorporates the student perspective from different segments of the higher education system, while taking into account the specific characteristics of university and professional study programmes. Student representatives participate in the work of the Council as equal members and take part in discussions on issues related to the quality of study programmes, the implementation of external evaluation procedures, and the application of quality criteria.

In addition to student representatives, the Accreditation Council also includes representatives of the academic community from various scientific and artistic fields, representing an interdisciplinary group of experts relevant to the higher education system. The Council's discussions address issues related to external evaluation procedures, the interpretation of quality criteria, and specific methodological aspects of the procedures conducted by the Agency.

The participation of representatives of different stakeholder groups in the work of the Accreditation Council enables the exchange of experience from different segments of the higher education system. The composition of the Council reflects a range of institutional and student perspectives together with the wider context in which issues concerning quality in higher education are considered.

In accordance with the legislative framework, the Agency has also established additional bodies that participate in specific stages of quality assurance procedures. The Appeals and Complaints Committee considers complaints and appeals from institutions about the implementation of external evaluation procedures, while the Follow-up Committee oversees the implementation of recommendations resulting from evaluation procedures. Student representatives also participate in the work of these bodies, ensuring the involvement of students in the various stages of quality assurance procedures (evidence: decisions on the establishment and composition of committees).

Stakeholders are further involved through participation in expert panels conducting external evaluation procedures. The committees include international and national experts from academia, student representatives and, where appropriate, representatives of relevant professional fields. This composition makes it possible to consider different aspects of the quality of study programmes and institutions, including academic standards, student perspectives, and the societal relevance of study programmes (evidence: methodologies of procedures and composition of expert committees).

Advisory and development activities

Besides formal mechanisms of participation, the Agency also conducts a number of activities that allow for broader stakeholder involvement in debates on the development of the quality assurance system.

Such activities include workshops, expert meetings, conferences and thematic meetings involving representatives of higher education institutions, students, members of expert panels and representatives of other relevant institutions. The activities often focus on issues related to the implementation of external evaluation procedures, including the evaluation methodology, the application of quality criteria, the preparation of institutions for evaluation procedures, and the implementation of recommendations (evidence: overview of workshops and professional events).

The Agency also conducts public consultations on draft regulations, methodologies and other documents governing the implementation of external quality assurance procedures. During these consultations, interested stakeholders can submit comments and suggestions that are considered in the process of finalising the documents, and the results of the consultation are publicly available (evidence: public consultations and reports on the consultations conducted).

Through these activities, the Agency maintains continuous communication with institutions and other relevant stakeholders of the system and ensures that practical experience is considered in the further development of quality assurance procedures and methodologies.

The Agency does not provide consultancy services.

Distinguishing between ESG and non-ESG activities

ASHE conducts [activities that fall both within and outside the scope of the ESG](#) while drawing a clear distinction based on several operational and content-related criteria. The Agency distinguishes ESG aligned activities based on clearly defined criteria and their relevance to teaching and learning in higher education. Activities that are largely focused on research and system level analysis, conducted on an ad hoc basis without predefined methodologies or standards, are considered outside the ESG scope and are not part of the accreditation cycle. ESG aligned activities are clearly marked with a dedicated logo and are transparently presented on the Agency's webpage for easy identification.

The Agency also conducts a number of activities that are not ESG-related, reflecting the broader responsibilities assigned to the Agency under national legislation:

- initial accreditation of research institutes
- re-accreditation of research institutes
- thematic evaluation
- one-off evaluation
- evaluation of the implementation of programme contracts
- implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework (at level 5 in the part related to higher education and at levels 6, 7 and 8 of the Croatian Qualifications Framework)
- evaluation and recognition of foreign educational qualifications
- applications to higher education institutions and study programmes.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- the Agency's new Strategy for 2026–2030, which provides the framework for the implementation of the Agency's activities
- greater involvement of stakeholders in the Agency's bodies
- involvement of two student representatives in the Accreditation Council (one as a university representative and one as a polytechnic representative) in order for the composition to better

reflect the binary structure of higher education (previously there was one student representative) (ENQA review panel recommendation)

- involvement of student representatives in the Appeals and Complaints Committee and the Follow-up Committee (ENQA review panel recommendation, EQAR Decision)

Challenges

- expanded scope of activities under the new legislative framework and their effective implementation
- further development of cooperation and stakeholder participation in the Agency's operations and activities

Evidence

- [Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science \(English version – internal translation\)](#)
- [ASHE Mission](#)
- [ASHE Strategy](#)
- [ESG and non-ESG activities](#)

5. Compliance with Part 2 of the ESG

5.1 ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

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

The Agency's activities and external quality assurance procedures implemented in Croatian higher education in the last fifteen years have had a significant impact on higher education institutions and the construction of their internal quality assurance systems in line with the ESG. Aware of its responsibility in the system, the Agency, through its various activities, sought to promote the importance of the ESG and the exchange of experiences and examples of good practice in its implementation. Therefore, particular attention was paid to developing quality standards used in external evaluation procedures, ensuring that they appropriately reflect all standards from Part 1 of the ESG, depending on the purpose of each individual external evaluation procedure.

One of the key changes since the last ENQA review concerns the development of revised quality standards for the third cycle of external evaluations under the new Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science that entered into force in 2023 and in line with the feedback collected during the implementation of the second cycle of external evaluations. Particular attention was paid to maintaining full compliance of quality standards with Part 1 of the ESG standards.

During 2023, the following quality standards were developed and adopted, which are used in external evaluation procedures:

- Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short-cycle programmes
- Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short-cycle online study programmes
- Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of doctoral study programmes
- Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of online doctoral studies
- Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions
- Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions
- Quality standards in the procedure of cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions
- Quality standards in the accreditation procedure of joint study programmes offered by (a) Croatian and (a) foreign higher education institution(s)

Proposals for these quality standards were developed by the Agency in cooperation with the Accreditation Council. Quality standards were adopted by the Accreditation Council, after which a public consultation procedure was conducted on these standards. Based on the feedback from stakeholders collected in the public consultation procedure, a final version of the quality standards was developed and published on the Agency's website, and their application began at the end of 2023 for initial accreditation procedures for study programmes and in 2024 for re-accreditation procedures for higher education institutions.

Quality standards used in the procedure of initial accreditation of studies and re-accreditation of higher education institutions were additionally tested in the implementation of trial initial accreditation and in the implementation of trial re-accreditation, after which analyses of these procedures were made and based on analysis and fine-tuning of the standards. Focus group sessions are currently underway in order to obtain information from higher education institutions that have participated in the re-accreditation process about the strengths, weaknesses, and necessary improvements. Focus groups are conducted in the form of stakeholder interviews and discussions, complementing the questionnaire-based method of collecting feedback. These procedures are part of the internal quality assurance system and represent tools for continuous monitoring and improvement of the quality of standards used in evaluation procedures.

The quality standards used in evaluation procedures were presented at the session of the Rector's Conference and the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges. The Agency also held workshops on new standards used in the procedure of initial accreditation of studies and re-accreditation of higher education institutions.

The main changes to the quality standards applied in the third cycle are: the inclusion of minimum legal criteria defined by the new Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science (mostly quantitative minimum requirements relating to required resources), a reduction of the overall number of standards, further integration of certain standards, introduction of several new standards, additional clarification of the wording of the standards, and improved alignment between elements and indicators with the standards. Regarding the standards applied in the initial accreditation of study programmes, tailored versions of these standards have been developed to include additional quality aspects specific for doctoral programmes and for online studies. The standards for the initial accreditation of study programmes are also embedded in the standards for the initial accreditation of higher education institutions, which additionally emphasize the institutional aspect. Regarding the standards for re-accreditation of higher education institutions, additional emphasis has been placed on topics such as the management of higher education institutions, internal quality assurance, and the promotion of open science. In line with these changes, the quality standards used for evaluating higher education institutions abroad have also been revised so as to follow the standards applied in the national context. The standards for evaluating the quality of joint study programmes are fully aligned with the standards established by the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Compliance of quality standards used in evaluation procedures with Part 1 of the ESG is shown in the mapping table (**Annex 1**) and further clarified below:

ESG 1.1

The quality standards applied in all external evaluation procedures include the evaluation of the policies and procedures implemented by higher education institutions for quality assurance, although this aspect is addressed differently depending on the type of procedure. In the initial accreditation of study programmes, the emphasis is placed on the procedures applied by the higher education institution to ensure the quality of a new study programme, including the way stakeholders are involved, the data used to ensure the programme's relevance and currency, and the procedure for approving the new study programme. Within the re-accreditation of higher education institutions, particular importance is attached to this aspect, assessing whether the institution has suitable quality assurance policies and procedures for all areas of its activity, whether stakeholders participate in these processes, and how effective the system is, specifically whether the outcomes of internal and external evaluations are used in management and strategic planning to support continuous quality improvement. An aspect related to ensuring ethics and integrity is also included.

ESG 1.2

The quality standards applied in all external evaluation procedures emphasize the segment related to the quality of the study programme, the relevance of the intended learning outcomes (LOs) and

the connection with the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CroQF). Although higher education institution re-accreditation procedures also assess the ways in which the institution ensures the quality of its study programmes, the relevance of intended learning outcomes, and their connection with the CroQF, these elements are evaluated in considerably greater detail during the initial accreditation of study programmes (programme learning outcomes and their alignment with the relevant CroQF level and qualification standard, where such a standard has been adopted, the alignment between course and programme learning outcomes, course content, ECTS credits; opportunities for practical work, and similar aspects). The standards used for the initial accreditation of doctoral study programmes include a standard related to the extent to which the content of the doctoral study programme contributes to research work and the training of doctoral candidates for scientific activity.

ESG 1.3

Student-centred teaching is still a relatively new concept for Croatian higher education institutions. Consequently, this segment is given considerable emphasis in all quality standards used by the Agency in its procedures in order to encourage further development in this field. In the initial accreditation of study programmes, the evaluation focuses on the teaching and assessment methods planned for the delivery of the new study programme, whereas in re-accreditation procedures the evaluation examines the extent to which the higher education institution has implemented the concept of student-centred learning and teaching, with particular consideration given to student feedback (use of contemporary teaching methods, ensuring objectivity and consistency in assessment, alignment of teaching and assessment methods with the intended learning outcomes of the programme, student support, etc.). In the standards for the initial accreditation of online study programmes, there is an additional emphasis on the adaptation of teaching and assessment methods in the online environment, as well as overall support for students in the online environment to ensure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and an optimal study experience.

ESG 1.4

Student enrolment and progression, as well as recognition of prior learning, are covered by the quality standards used in all external evaluation procedures. In the initial accreditation of study programmes, it is evaluated how the higher education institution has defined the criteria for enrolment and continuation of study programmes, as well as the recognition of prior learning. In the re-accreditation of higher education institutions, the evaluation examines how these rules are implemented in practice, while discussions with stakeholders aim to obtain information about their experience with the application of such rules. In the standards for the initial accreditation of doctoral study programmes, particular emphasis is placed on clear and transparent procedures and criteria enabling the enrolment of motivated and talented doctoral candidates, as well as on transparent conditions for study progression and completion, including the process of preparing and defending the doctoral thesis, which comprises the public presentation of the doctoral research topic, the public defence and publication of the doctoral thesis.

ESG 1.5

Quality assurance of teaching staff is emphasised in the quality standards applied across all external evaluation procedures. In the standards for the initial accreditation of study programmes, the emphasis is placed on whether the higher education institution has ensured adequate teaching capacities for the launch of the new study programme. In the standards for the re-accreditation of higher education institutions, the focus is on the quality of the teaching staff involved in the delivery of all study programmes, the conditions for teacher recruitment and promotion, and support for the development of teaching competences. The standards for the initial accreditation of online study programmes further highlight the importance of supporting teachers in the improvement of their digital competences. In the standards for the initial accreditation of doctoral study programmes, the emphasis is placed on the verification of the qualifications of mentors based on scientific excellence and support for the development of mentors' competences.

ESG 1.6

Learning resources and student support services are included in all quality standards used in external evaluation procedures. In the initial accreditation procedure, the evaluation focuses on the resources for student support that have been ensured by the higher education institution planning to deliver the new study programme, whereas in the re-accreditation of higher education institutions the evaluation examines the availability of resources for the delivery of all study programmes, student satisfaction with the available resources and support, and similar aspects. The standards

for the initial accreditation of online study programmes have additionally been supplemented with criteria relating to whether the overall infrastructure and technical prerequisites are adequate for the high-quality delivery of online studies and whether appropriate support for students studying in an online environment has been ensured.

ESG 1.7

Information management, including the continuous collection, analysis and use of data for effective management, is incorporated into all quality standards applied in external evaluation procedures. In the initial accreditation procedure, the evaluation examines how the higher education institution plans to manage information and data for the effective delivery and continuous improvement of the new study programme, whereas in the re-accreditation of higher education institutions, the evaluation focuses on how the institution manages data and uses it for quality enhancement. This segment is additionally emphasised in the standards for the initial accreditation of online study programmes through the application of learning analytics, in order to enable more effective monitoring of student success in the online learning environment.

ESG 1.8

Providing information to the public is included in the quality standards applied across all external evaluation procedures. In the initial accreditation procedure, the evaluation examines how the higher education institution plans to inform the public about the various segments of the implementation of the new study programme, while in the re-accreditation of the higher education institution the evaluation focuses on how the institution informs the public about all its activities, what information it publishes and how up-to-date it is.

ESG 1.9

The continuous improvement and further development of study programmes form an integral part of all quality standards. In initial accreditation procedures, particular attention is given to the mechanisms established by the higher education institution for monitoring the quality of the new study programme following the start of its implementation. In the re-accreditation of higher education institutions, the evaluation examines the data and indicators on the basis of which the institution plans and implements programme improvements, how stakeholders are involved in these processes, the evidence supporting such activities, which study programmes have been revised, whether the revised versions of the programmes are publicly available, etc.

ESG 1.10

Participation of higher education institutions and their study programmes in periodic external evaluation cycles is incorporated into the standards applied in the periodic re-accreditation of higher education institutions.

Stakeholder feedback

According to the feedback collected to date from stakeholders participating in initial accreditation procedures (Croatian and international members of expert panels and higher education institutions), the clarity of the themes and standards used in these procedures received relatively high scores (4.28 out of 5 from Croatian panel members, 4.22 out of 5 from international panel members, and 4.29 out of 5 from higher education institutions). The feedback suggests that the standards are complex but clear and well-developed. Furthermore, the feedback indicates that the overall documentation is extensive, that certain parts of the standards are repetitive, that further modernisation of the standards is possible (e.g. integrating the use of AI in the educational process) and that additional work is needed to improve the functionality of the ISPIK information system and tables, as well as to reduce the amount of data that must be collected through these tables. In line with this feedback, all of the above remain challenges to be addressed in the future.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- revised and improved quality standards for the third cycle of external evaluations
- more clearly defined standards, elements of the standards and indicators

- targeted versions of the standards for the implementation of the initial accreditation of doctoral studies and online studies
- involvement of stakeholders in providing feedback on the quality of standards for the third cycle of re-accreditation of higher education institutions and piloting standards
- all Part 1 ESG standards are included in the standards used in cross-border evaluations, as well as in the analysis of compliance with those standards in expert panel reports (EQAR recommendation)
- when implementing the initial accreditation of study programmes, compliance with the qualification standard is also checked, where such a standard has been entered in the Croatian Qualifications Framework Register (ENQA review panel recommendation)
- the website clearly shows information on the initial accreditation of study programmes and the initial accreditation of higher education institutions as two separate processes (ENQA review panel recommendation)

Challenges

- the application of qualification standards (CroQF standards) in accreditation procedures, given that the number of adopted qualification standards registered in the CroQF Register remains low; therefore, the accreditation is based on verifying the alignment of intended learning outcomes with generic descriptors of CroQF levels, as well as on peer-review evaluation of the relevance of intended learning outcomes
- further development of the quality standards for the next cycle of external evaluations in accordance with the new ESG, taking into account the need to reduce the scope of documentation, strengthen the functionality of the ISPIK information system and streamline the amount of data collected through tables, as well as to further modernise the quality standards

Evidence

Evidence of public consultations

- [Launch of the public consultation on the standards and procedure for the initial accreditation of study programmes](#)
- [Public consultation on the proposal of documents and accompanying forms for conducting evaluations of higher education institutions and scientific institutes abroad](#)
- [Public consultation on the proposal of documents for the implementation of the initial accreditation of the online doctoral studies](#)

Evidence of workshops

- [Online workshops on “Initiation of the initial accreditation of study programmes”](#)
- [The Agency for Science and Higher Education organised training on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
- [ASHE organised training on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
- [Education on the entry of data necessary for the preparation of the analytical supplement in the process of re-accreditation](#)
- [ASHE organised training on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
- [Education on the entry of data necessary for the preparation of the analytical supplement in the process of re-accreditation](#)

Quality standards (for all types of external evaluations)

- [Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short-cycle programmes](#)

- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short-cycle online study programmes](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of doctoral study programmes](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of online doctoral studies](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Quality standards in the procedure of cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Quality standards in the accreditation procedure of joint study programmes offered by \(a\) Croatian and \(a\) foreign higher education institution\(s\)](#)

5.2 ESG Standard 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.

The basis for the development of methodologies for external quality assurance in Croatian higher education is the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science. Given that the Quality Assurance Act was adopted at the end of 2022 and replaced the previous Quality Assurance Act that had been in force since 2009, there was a need to align methodologies with the new Act. Extensive work on these developments was carried out during 2023, and the new external quality assurance procedures in accordance with the new Act have been in implementation since the 2023/2024 academic year.

A major change introduced by the new Act is that all public universities must now, in accordance with the new legal framework, submit newly proposed study programmes for initial accreditation, as they no longer have the authority to self-accredit new programmes. Furthermore, the previous procedure of re-accreditation of part of the activities of the higher education institution as well as the procedure of external independent periodic review (audit) are no longer carried out. The purpose of these changes was to reduce the number of periodically conducted external evaluation procedures and to lessen the administrative burden on higher education institutions, especially in relation to conducting two separate forms of institutional evaluation, i.e. re-accreditation of the higher education institution and audit procedures. The intention was also to reinforce the effectiveness and purpose of the procedures that remain in place under the new Act in order to further strengthen the quality of higher education.

In line with these changes, there are three main (mandatory) external evaluation procedures: **initial accreditation of study programmes** (ex-ante programme accreditation), **initial accreditation of a higher education institutions** (ex-ante institutional accreditation) and **re-accreditation of a higher education institution** (ex-post institutional accreditation). The purpose of the initial accreditation of study programmes is to ensure the quality of new studies proposed by all higher education institutions, including public universities. In the procedure of initial accreditation of study programmes, the proposed programme is evaluated against the quality standards, with the procedure additionally resulting in recommendations for the improvement of the new study programme. Higher education institutions may start delivering a new study programme only after obtaining a positive accreditation decision and following its entry into the Register of Study Programmes maintained by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth. The purpose of this approach is to support higher education institutions in assuring the quality of new study programmes, to overcome some of the weaknesses identified in earlier programme approval procedures, and to continue fostering the development of internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions. Similarly, the purpose of the initial accreditation of higher education institutions is to ensure the quality of the new higher education institution and the studies it proposes. Re-accreditation of higher education institutions continues to be the cornerstone of external quality assurance. The purpose of the re-accreditation is to continuously improve the quality of higher education institutions in all aspects of their work (internal quality assurance system, study programmes, teaching and assessment, student support, resources, scientific

activities, etc.). Re-accreditation of higher education institutions is conducted in five-year cycles, which enables monitoring of quality and implementation of improvements in accordance with the recommendations from the previous cycle. This enables higher education institutions to demonstrate improvements made and supports them in improving quality.

Each of the three external evaluation procedures has a clearly defined objective and purpose, they complement one another, and this integrated approach is intended to foster the comprehensive development of quality within the higher education system.

Furthermore, in accordance with the Act, the Agency may also conduct the following external evaluation procedures: **cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions**, which follows a methodology similar to that adopted for the re-accreditation of higher education institutions, and **evaluation of joint programmes**, which is fully aligned with the methodology of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

An additional challenge lies in planning quality assurance models for future needs while taking into account the continued development of the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions. The Agency has already initiated discussions on possible models for the fourth cycle of external evaluations, since it is clear that, after three cycles of higher education institution re-accreditation conducted under a broadly similar model, further developments should be considered. There is still a need to support higher education institutions in developing their systems. In addition, in line with current trends in quality assurance, further possibilities for introducing innovative and more flexible approaches to quality assurance will also be considered. "Accordingly, the possibility is being considered of introducing procedures adapted to the level of development of the quality assurance system of each higher education institution, in line with accreditation findings, which would further reduce administrative burden and place greater emphasis on the responsibility of higher education institutions for their own quality. Although the Agency still has the possibility to conduct thematic and one-off evaluations under the current Act, these procedures have not yet become established in practice. The Agency will continue to actively involve stakeholders in planning further development.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- established a new external evaluation framework, reducing the number of procedures conducted periodically
- revised and improved the methodologies for conducting external evaluation procedures in cooperation with stakeholders
- collecting stakeholder feedback on the quality of methodologies for conducting cross-border evaluations (EQAR decision)

Challenges

- planning the further development of external evaluation models in line with the needs of the Croatian higher education system, trends in quality assurance and the revised ESG, as well as the development of corresponding methodologies

Evidence

Evidence of public consultations

- [Launch of the Public Consultation on the Standards and Procedure for the Initial Accreditation of Study Programmes](#)
- [Public consultation on the proposal of documents and accompanying forms for conducting evaluations of higher education institutions and scientific institutes abroad](#)
- [Public consultation on the proposal of documents for the implementation of the initial accreditation of the online doctoral studies](#)

Evidence of workshops

- [Online workshops on the "Initiation of the initial accreditation of study programmes"](#)
- [The Agency for Science and Higher Education organised education on the preparation of the Self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
- [ASHE organised training on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of](#)

[re-accreditation](#)

- [Education on the entry of data necessary for the preparation of the analytic supplement in the process of re-accreditation](#)
- [ASHE organised training on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
- [Education on the entry of data necessary for the preparation of the analytic supplement in the process of re-accreditation](#)

5.3. ESG Standard 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 evaluation normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

All external quality assurance procedures carried out by the Agency for Science and Higher Education are conducted according to the established methodology published on the Agency's website. Each external evaluation procedure is governed by formal regulations that comprehensively describe the organisation of verification procedures, the composition of evaluation bodies and the evaluation criteria ([Ordinance on Conducting the Procedure of Re-accreditation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Instructions for Conducting the Procedure of Initial Accreditation of Studies](#), [Instructions for Conducting the Procedure of Initial Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Ordinance on the Cross-border Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Ordinance on Implementation of Accreditation of Joint Studies of Domestic and/or Foreign Higher Education Institution\(s\)](#)). They have been designed taking into account the ESG, the best evaluation practices applied by European quality assurance agencies, as well as national criteria in higher education and research.

The general model applied in all external quality assurance procedures includes the following steps:

- preparation of the self-evaluation report
- site visit to the HEI
- drafting the expert panel report
- consideration of the report by the Accreditation Council and adoption of the Reasoned Proposal (the official statement on the proposed decision)
- adoption of the decision on issuing the accreditation license by the Agency
- follow-up.

The self-evaluation report template is an integral part of the methodology of each individual procedure. Workshops for higher education institutions on topics covered by the self-evaluation report are held on a regular basis. A dedicated workshop is organised on the data included in the analytic supplement as part of the re-accreditation procedure, given the volume of data that higher education institutions are required to prepare.

The self-evaluation report is drafted using a template aligned with the standards, and the quality standards document provides a list of indicators and evidence. In addition to the narrative part of the self-evaluation report, higher education institutions are also required to provide quantitative data. The data is entered into the Indicators and Quality Information System (ISPiK). The re-accreditation

module within the Indicators and Quality Information System (ISPiK) was developed to support the preparation of an analytic supplement to the self-evaluation report for higher education institutions in the re-accreditation process. The template for presenting data is an integral component of the self-evaluation report, mirrors its structure, and is generated following the entry of data into the system. The analytic supplement is prepared in both Croatian and English, as the entire procedure is conducted in two languages.

The duration and structure of the site visit to the higher education institution depends on the type of evaluation procedure. The general model applied in external quality assurance procedures includes the following steps: in initial accreditation procedures and in accreditation of joint studies, the visit is shorter and lasts 1 to 2 working days, in re-accreditation procedures and cross-border evaluation of HEIs it lasts 3 to 4 days. Prior to the visit to the higher education institution, the expert panel has a preparatory meeting with the coordinator. The site visit is always conducted according to a pre-established schedule agreed with the higher education institution, while an appointed Agency staff member (the coordinator) is responsible for ensuring its consistent implementation and smooth coordination. As a rule, site visits to higher education institutions are conducted in person, although during the COVID-19 pandemic they were exceptionally organised in a hybrid format.

Following the site visit, the expert panel jointly prepares the report in accordance with the Quality Standards and the rules defined for each external evaluation procedure conducted by the Agency, and submits it to the Agency for a consistency and compliance review. The template for the expert panel report is defined in advance and constitutes an integral component of the methodology for each evaluation procedure. Besides the analysis of compliance with the defined criteria, the report includes examples of good institutional practice, as well as recommendations for quality improvement.

Based on the content of the final report, the Accreditation Council adopts a decision (Reasoned Proposal) during its session in the context of external evaluation procedures. A higher education institution may file an appeal against the Reasoned Proposal with the Appeals and Complaints Committee within 30 days of receiving the Reasoned Proposal. The appeal should be substantiated and supported by relevant evidence.

The Agency adopts a formal decision to issue a license. Based on the Reasoned Proposal of the Accreditation Council and, where applicable, the opinion of the Appeals and Complaints Committee following an appeal, the Agency adopts a formal decision to issue a letter of expectation, revoke the accreditation license of a higher education institution, or revoke the license for the delivery of a study programme, within 30 days of receiving the Reasoned Proposal or the opinion of the Appeals and Complaints Committee.

In the initial accreditation:

The decision issuing the accreditation license also specifies the follow-up procedure for the delivery of the study programme, which is conducted by the Follow-up Committee. The Follow-up Committee monitors the delivery of the study programme during the first cycle of programme delivery. The higher education institution is obliged to adopt an action plan setting out the activities, deadlines and indicators necessary to meet the recommendations of the expert panel no later than three months after the issuance of the accreditation license. The Follow-up Committee analyses and evaluates the activities envisaged in the action plan and issues an opinion to be sent to the Accreditation Council. The higher education institution is obliged to report on the achievement of the activities envisaged by the action plan after the completion of the first cycle of delivery of the comprehensive study programme.

In the re-accreditation procedure:

The decision issuing the accreditation license also determines the follow-up procedure for the delivery of the study programme, which is conducted by the Follow-up Committee. If a letter of expectation was issued, the Follow-up Committee monitors the work of the higher education institution for three years. A higher education institution that has been issued a letter of expectation is required, no later than three months from the date of its issuance, to adopt an action plan defining the activities, timelines, and indicators necessary for implementing the measures specified in the letter of expectation. The Accreditation Council decides on the merits of the proposed activities, deadlines and indicators within 30 days at the latest. If the higher education institution fails to implement the activities in accordance with the set deadlines and indicators, the Accreditation Council proposes to the Agency to revoke the accreditation license for the work of the higher education institution and/or to revoke the license for the delivery of study programmes. The Agency decides on the revocation of

the accreditation license of a higher education institution and on the revocation of the license for the delivery of a study programme by formal decision.

In the case of issuing an accreditation license, the decision issuing the license also determines the follow-up procedure for the higher education institution, which is conducted by the Follow-up Committee. The follow-up process assesses and/or evaluates the implementation of the expert panel's recommendations. The follow-up procedure includes the submission of an action plan for the enhancement of the quality of the higher education institution's activities in line with the recommendations of the expert panel, as well as reporting on the implementation of the action plan. The Follow-up Committee, after reviewing the documentation, submits to the Accreditation Council its opinion on the adoption or non-adoption of the action plan, i.e. the report on the implementation of the action plan. The opinion is discussed at the session of the Accreditation Council and, after its adoption, it is sent to the higher education institution.

Cross-Border Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions

The final report of Expert panel is submitted to the Accreditation Council of the Agency. On the basis of the final report, the Accreditation Council issues an expert opinion on the outcome of the cross-border evaluation procedure. The expert opinion may propose the issuance of an accreditation certificate, the issuance of a conditional accreditation certificate, or the denial of the accreditation certificate.

The expert opinion is submitted to the higher education institution, which may file a complaint with the Appeals and Complaints Committee within 30 days of receiving the opinion. The Committee examines whether the complaint is justified and must respond to each claim made in the complaint no later than 15 days after receiving it.

The Agency may issue an accreditation certificate for a period of five years, issue a conditional accreditation certificate for a specified period of up to three years, or deny the accreditation certificate. If a conditional accreditation certificate is issued, the decision must define the measures that the higher education institution is required to implement in order to meet the criteria for operating as a higher education institution, as well as the deadline for implementing those measures. The decision must be made no later than 30 days from the date on which the Agency receives the expert opinion or the comments of the Appeals and Complaints Committee.

In cases where a conditional accreditation certificate has been issued Follow-up Committee monitors the operations of the higher education institution for a period of three years. The higher education institution is required, no later than six months from the date of issuance of the conditional certificate, to adopt a plan defining the activities, deadlines and indicators necessary for implementing the measures prescribed by the conditional certificate. If the higher education institution fails to carry out the required activities within the established deadlines, the Agency may revoke the conditional certificate. However, if it is determined, on the basis of the submitted evidence, that the deficiencies which led to the issuance of the conditional certificate have been remedied, the Agency issues an accreditation certificate.

European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The Consortium has the right to submit comments on the report of the Expert Panel within 15 days from the date of receiving the report. The comments shall relate to the request for rectification of purely factual inaccuracies or obvious errors in the report. The Agency forwards the Consortium's comments to the Expert Panel, which may correct the report if it considers the comments justified. In that case, the Expert Panel must submit the final report to the Agency within 15 days, and the final report is then submitted to the Consortium for information.

Once the Expert Panel's final report has been completed, it is submitted to the Accreditation Council of the Agency. On the basis of the final report, the Accreditation Council prepares a reasoned proposal on whether the licence to conduct the joint study should be granted.

The proposal is submitted to the Consortium, which has the right to lodge an objection within 30 days from the date of receiving the proposal. The Appeals and Complaints Committee examines the merits of the objection and must respond to all allegations stated in the objection within 15 days from the date of receiving it.

Based on the reasoned proposal of the Accreditation Council and, where an objection has been lodged, the observations of the Complaints Committee, the Agency decides whether to grant the licence for the implementation of the joint study or to refuse the application for the licence. The

decision must be adopted no later than 30 days from the date of receiving the reasoned proposal of the Accreditation Council or the observations of the Appeals and Complaints Committee. The Agency's decision is not subject to appeal, but it is possible to initiate an administrative dispute.

The decision granting the licence also determines the follow-up procedure for the implementation of the joint study, which is conducted by the Follow-up Committee. The purpose of the follow-up procedure is to assess the fulfilment of any conditions that may have been imposed and/or to evaluate the implementation of the Expert Panel's recommendations. The procedure includes the submission of an action plan for improving the quality of the joint study, prepared in line with the Expert Panel's recommendations, as well as reporting on the implementation of that action plan. The Follow-up Committee submits its opinion to the Accreditation Council on whether the action plan should be adopted or not adopted, and also reports on the implementation of the action plan. The opinion is discussed at a session of the Accreditation Council and, once adopted, is delivered to the Consortium.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- revised and improved quality standards for the third cycle of external evaluations, which enable the development of better self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions as a starting point for external evaluation
- use of the ISPIK information system in re-accreditation procedures, revised templates for the preparation of the self-evaluation reports with the analytic supplement and the final report of the expert panel, as well as the action plan for improvement
- more detailed regulation of follow-up procedures, especially regarding the various possible outcomes of the procedure
- decision on issuing the accreditation license by the Agency
- the Agency consistently conducts all external evaluation procedures, including cross-border evaluations (EQAR decision)

Challenges

- misalignment between the five-year validity period of the licence prescribed by national legislation and the six-year external quality assurance cycle envisaged by the European Approach
- ensure uninterrupted and successful work in the information system supporting re-accreditation
- ensure a high level of quality of self-evaluation reports across different procedures

Evidence

- [Ordinance on conducting the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of studies](#)
- [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Ordinance on the cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Ordinance on Implementation of Accreditation of Joint Studies of Domestic and/or Foreign Higher Education Institution\(s\)](#)

5.4. ESG Standard 2.4. Peer-review experts

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

The Accreditation Council appoints an expert panel of at least five members in external evaluation procedures, and the composition of the committee is determined depending on the type of institution or study programme to be evaluated ([Ordinance on Conducting the Procedure of Re-accreditation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Instructions for Conducting the Procedure of Initial Accreditation of Studies](#), [Instructions for Conducting the Procedure of Initial Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Ordinance on the Cross-border Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Ordinance on Implementation of Accreditation of Joint Studies of Domestic and/or Foreign Higher Education Institution\(s\)](#)). The members are appointed from among Croatian and international academic staff or researchers with the appropriate academic rank, provided that at least one member is an expert in the relevant disciplinary field. In the evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes, one member of the expert panel must be a student, who cannot serve as the chair of the panel. Limitations aimed at preventing conflicts of interest are also defined, so a panel member cannot be employed at an institution that delivers the same study programme or operates in the same scientific field as the evaluated institution. The members of the expert panel choose the panel chair from among themselves by means of a random draw.

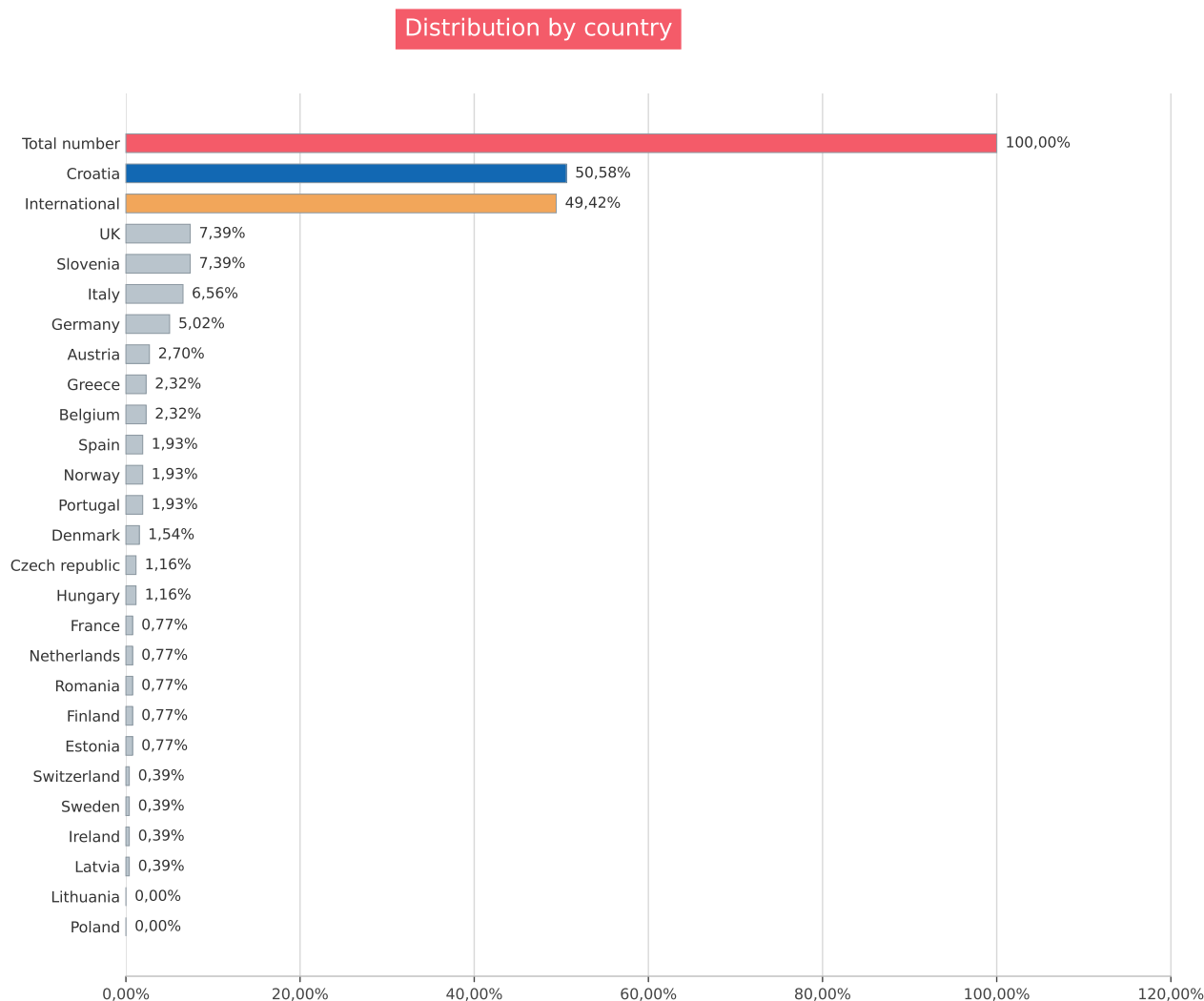
The procedure for selecting expert panel members begins with a public call published on the Agency's website. Depending on the scientific field of the higher education institution under evaluation, a proposal for the composition of expert panels is prepared on the basis of applications submitted to the database, recommendations from related agencies, and direct invitations to experts from the relevant scientific field. Before appointing the panel members, the Agency verifies that they are not in a conflict of interest with the higher education institution under evaluation. The higher education institution can report any conflicts of interest or biases in the proposed panel and may file a complaint within the given deadline. If no objection is made, the experts are contracted to conduct the review. If a complaint is submitted, the Accreditation Council reviews it and decides whether a new panel should be proposed.

In the re-accreditation procedure of higher education institutions, the expert panels consist of five members, or more where necessary. In the re-accreditation of polytechnics, the expert panel must include at least two members who participate in the delivery of professional study programmes.

In the third re-accreditation cycle, wherever possible, the expert panels include experts who had previously evaluated the same higher education institution in earlier re-accreditation cycles or in other external evaluation procedures in which the institution participated.

For example, 148 reviewers participated in the re-accreditation of higher education institutions in 2025. Approximately 60% of reviewers were from Croatia, which is due to the fact that student reviewers are predominantly recruited from domestic higher education institutions, and the overall gender distribution was 55% male and 45% female. In initial accreditation procedures for higher education institutions and/or study programmes, the expert panel consists of five members, one of whom is a student. 113 reviewers participated in the initial accreditation of the study programmes in 2025. Approximately 40% of reviewers were from Croatia, and the gender distribution was 40% women and 60% men.

Figure 4: Number of reviewers in the reaccreditation procedures of higher education institutions in 2025



The Agency provides training for members of expert panels involved in all external evaluation procedures. In 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Agency delivered synchronous online training sessions using videoconferencing technology. As the experience was exceptionally positive, the Agency developed asynchronous online training modules for expert panels hosted on the Moodle learning management system, i.e. its MoD environment. The content of the modules was tailored to the different evaluation procedures, and the Agency organised online training sessions for expert panel members.

A pilot module was implemented during 2023 as part of the re-accreditation procedures for higher education institutions, in cooperation with digital content design specialists and Agency coordinators responsible for the subject-matter content. Feedback from both participants and Agency coordinators was highly positive, while preparatory meetings with expert panel members, during which the subject of the evaluation is discussed in greater detail, continue to be held prior to site visits and have become shorter and more focused.

The system currently comprises several training modules designed for different evaluation procedures, including the initial accreditation of new study programmes, new doctoral programmes, joint programmes, and the re-accreditation of higher education institutions. Training is delivered through the Moodle system or dedicated digital learning tools, and the content covers an overview of the Agency's work, the Croatian higher education system, evaluation procedures, quality standards, the assessment system, and the preparation of final reports. Some modules also include interactive content and knowledge assessment activities. Usage statistics indicate extensive use of the modules, especially in re-accreditation procedures for higher education institutions and initial accreditations of study programmes. The sections most frequently consulted concerned evaluation procedures, quality standards and the Croatian higher education system, whereas more general informational content was accessed less frequently. The online training materials therefore represent an important step

in the digitalisation and enhancement of expert panel preparation, contributing to the more efficient organisation of evaluation procedures and ensuring a consistent level of information, understanding and preparedness among all participants.

At the end of each procedure, the Agency uses a survey to collect, among other information, feedback on expert panel members' satisfaction with the training activities and suggestions for their further enhancement.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- revised and improved online training for expert panels involved in external evaluation procedures
- further elaboration of provisions on conflicts of interest
- further elaboration of the criteria for the selection of expert panel members
- further elaboration of the rights and responsibilities of expert panel members

Challenges

- strengthening consistency across the work of different expert panels
- greater emphasis on the professional conduct of expert panel members
- increasing challenges in securing reviewers' willingness to participate due to the Accreditation Council's requirement to nominate a larger pool of reviewers than are ultimately appointed

Evidence

- [Ordinance on conducting the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of studies](#)
- [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Ordinance on the cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Ordinance on Implementation of Accreditation of Joint Studies of Domestic and/or Foreign Higher Education Institution\(s\)](#)
- [Example of online training](#)

5.5 ESG Standard 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.

The Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science defines the possible outcomes of the external evaluation procedures carried out by the Agency. In the procedures of **initial accreditation of study programmes** and **initial accreditation of a higher education institution**, the Agency issues a decision granting or refusing a license on the basis of a Reasoned Proposal submitted by the Accreditation Council and, where an appeal has been lodged, the opinion of the Appeals and Complaints Committee. In the **re-accreditation of higher education institutions**, the Agency adopts a decision to grant a license, issue a letter of expectation, revoke the license of the institution, or revoke the license for the delivery of a study programme, based on a Reasoned Proposal of the Accreditation Council and, where an appeal has been lodged, the opinion of the Appeals and Complaints Committee.

All outcomes of the external evaluation procedures conducted by the Agency are based on clearly defined criteria described in publicly available Ordinances and Instructions and are applied consistently.

The Agency ensures consistency in decisions on the outcomes of external evaluation procedures through the following key mechanisms:

Clear criteria with indicators and examples of evidence

The Agency places great emphasis on the development of the quality standards applied in its external evaluation procedures (see also ESG 2.1). In developing the quality standards for the third cycle, the Agency further refined the definitions of the standards, revised the indicators, and expanded the list of evidence that may be used to assess compliance with the standards. The Agency presented the standards to the Rectors' Conference and the Council of Polytechnics and organised a series of workshops with higher education institutions, with a particular focus on the quality standards and their implementation in the third cycle.

Through these activities, the Agency aimed to promote a clear and consistent understanding of the quality standards among higher education institutions, as this constitutes a key prerequisite for ensuring consistency in evaluations based on the standards.

Templates for the preparation of the higher education institution's self-evaluation report and the expert panel report

The Agency uses templates for the preparation of the higher education institution's (or study programme's) self-evaluation report and the expert panel's final report, which are structured in accordance with the quality standards. When preparing the self-evaluation report, higher education institutions are required to enter various quantitative data into dedicated tables specifically designed for this purpose. The tables are submitted together with the self-evaluation report as the analytic supplement. This ensures alignment between the quality standards and indicators, the self-evaluation report templates and analytic supplement, and the expert panel final report templates for each external evaluation procedure, thereby supporting the preparation of self-evaluation reports and final reports that provide the information necessary for a consistent assessment of compliance with the quality standards.

Training of expert panel members and Accreditation Council members

Participation in training for external evaluation procedures is mandatory for all expert panel members. The training consists of an asynchronous online component delivered through a learning management system, which expert panel members complete individually prior to the site visit, and a preparatory meeting held before the visit to the higher education institution. The training places strong emphasis on ensuring a thorough understanding of the quality standards, the application of the assessment rules, and the principles governing decisions on the outcome of the procedure.

Newly appointed members of the Accreditation Council receive dedicated induction training, they are well acquainted with the rules governing decisions on procedural outcomes, and are provided with Agency support during Council meetings.

The role of Agency coordinators

At the beginning of each external evaluation procedure, one Agency staff member is appointed as the coordinator of the external evaluation procedure. The coordinator is responsible for ensuring the quality of the entire procedure. The coordinator is trained in the conduct of external evaluation procedures (see Standard 3.5) and serves as a source of both professional and administrative support for the expert panel throughout the procedure. The coordinator's primary responsibility is to support the preparation of the expert panel for the evaluation, provide all necessary guidance on the quality standards, the evaluation procedure and the application of the agreed assessment rules, participate in the site visit to ensure that all relevant evidence is reviewed, and support the expert panel in assessing compliance with the quality standards and preparing the final report. Although the coordinator does not participate in the expert panel's decision-making, they help ensure that assessments are firmly grounded in evidence, that analyses are consistent with the quality grades awarded and the recommendations for improvement, and that the agreed assessment rules are applied consistently throughout the procedure. In this way, the coordinator plays an important role in ensuring consistency in the assessment of compliance with the quality standards.

Assessment and decision-making rules

The documents clarifying the external evaluation procedures ([Ordinance on Conducting the Procedure of Re-accreditation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Instructions for Conducting the Procedure of Initial Accreditation of Studies](#), [Ordinance on the Cross-border Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Instructions for Conducting the Procedure of Initial Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions](#), [Ordinance on Conducting Accreditation of Joint Studies of Domestic and/or Foreign](#)

[Higher Education Institutions](#)) contain clear rules for expert panels on assessing compliance with the standards and for the Accreditation Council on determining the outcomes of procedures.

The Rules and Instructions provide detailed guidance on the interpretation of the assessment scale (comprising either three or four levels, depending on the procedure), the methodology for determining ratings for evaluation areas based on the ratings of individual standards, and the rules used by the Accreditation Council in formulating its reasoned proposal on the basis of those ratings.

In conclusion, the Agency has carefully developed and uses various mechanisms to ensure consistency in decisions on the outcomes of external evaluation procedures. Nevertheless, the Agency recognises that ensuring consistency across the work of different expert panels remains an ongoing challenge and continues to actively consider ways of further strengthening the consistency and relevance of procedural outcomes.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- revised and improved quality standards for the third cycle of external evaluations
- more clearly defined standards, elements of the standards, indicators and examples of evidence
- revised templates for self-evaluation reports with the analytic supplement and for the final report of the expert panel
- introduction of additional online training for expert panel members
- further elaboration of the rules for assessing compliance with the quality standards and determining the outcomes of external evaluation procedures
- after receiving the higher education institution's comments on the expert panel report, the Agency forwards them to the expert panel, which reviews the comments and prepares the final version of the report accordingly (ENQA review panel recommendation and EQAR decision)
- as the new legislative framework no longer allows for a letter of expectation to be issued together with a restriction on student enrolment, there was no need to develop more detailed rules specifying the circumstances in which such an outcome could be applied (according to the ENQA recommendation and the EQAR decision)

Challenges

- further efforts to ensure consistency in the assessment of compliance with the quality standards across different expert panels

Evidence

Quality standards

- [Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short-cycle programmes](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short-cycle online study programmes](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of doctoral study programmes](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of online doctoral studies](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Quality standards in the procedure of cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Quality standards in the accreditation procedure of joint study programmes offered by \(a\) Croatian and \(a\) foreign higher education institution\(s\)](#)

Ordinances and Instructions for conducting external evaluation procedures

- [Ordinance on conducting the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of studies](#)
- [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Ordinance on the cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions](#)
- [Ordinance on Implementation of Accreditation of Joint Studies of Domestic and/or Foreign Higher Education Institution\(s\)](#)

5.6 ESG Standard 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.

Since its establishment, the Agency has considered transparency to be a core principle of quality assurance and has consistently worked to ensure public access to information on its activities, including the regular publication of documents produced in external evaluation procedures.

Upon completion of an external evaluation procedure, the Agency routinely **publishes on its website the expert panel's final report in Croatian and English, the reasoned proposal of the Accreditation Council, and the final decision of the Agency.** The main change compared to the previous period is that, under the new Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science, the Agency now adopts the final decision on the outcome of an external evaluation procedure, whereas this responsibility previously rested with the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth. In line with this change, the Agency now publishes its final decision, whereas under the previous legislative framework it published a recommendation submitted to the Ministry for further action.

To ensure the greatest possible visibility and accessibility of reports and decisions resulting from external evaluation procedures, the Agency has continued its practice of publishing these documents in a dedicated [Overview of external evaluation procedures in science and higher education](#) section, which is accessible directly from the Agency's homepage. The section allows users to browse information by type of higher education institution and type of external evaluation procedure, making it possible to obtain an overview of all external evaluation procedures in which a particular higher education institution has participated to date.

The Overview of External Evaluation Procedures section is linked to the Agency's internal CEP database (Central Data Repository), which supports the Agency's operational processes and is also connected to EQAR's DEQAR database (Database of External Quality Assurance Results). Once an external evaluation procedure has been completed, documents entered into the CEP database and marked for publication are automatically made available in both the Overview of External Evaluation Procedures section on the Agency's website and in the DEQAR database.

The Agency's commitment to ensuring access to information and documents arising from external evaluation procedures is also reflected in its active participation in the DEQAR (Database of External Quality Assurance Results) and DEQAR CONNECT (Enhancing the Coverage and Connectivity of QA in the EHEA through DEQAR) projects. In 2023, the Agency also launched a new website, designed to provide improved access to key information and a more user-friendly experience for stakeholders through a modernised and refreshed interface.

The Agency attaches great importance not only to the publication of all documents arising from external evaluation procedures, but also to maintaining the quality and consistency of the final reports produced in those procedures. The Agency uses several mechanisms to achieve this. It uses templates for final reports that are structured around the quality standards, ensuring a consistent format across all reports. Training for expert panel members is delivered both online and face-to-face. The online training, introduced as a new element, places strong emphasis on guidance for preparing high-quality reports. This is complemented by a preparatory meeting before the site visit, during which the importance of producing high-quality reports is further emphasised. The Agency coordinator responsible for a particular external evaluation procedure works closely with the expert

panel through the entire process, providing guidance and clarification as needed, participating in the site visit, monitoring the preparation of the final report, and offering comments and suggestions aimed at improving its quality. External evaluation procedures include dedicated time following the site visit during which the expert panel discusses the information collected, agrees on quality grades for each quality standard and on the overall outcome, and prepares a summary of the main findings and recommendations. After the site visit, the expert panel drafts its report and submits it to the Agency within one month. During the report preparation phase, the expert panel and the coordinator maintain regular communication by email, and additional online meetings are frequently organised to clarify outstanding issues.

In conclusion, the Agency is satisfied with the transparency of its work, the regular publication of information, and the accessibility of that information, which contribute to keeping stakeholders well informed. The Agency has observed that stakeholders indeed make use of the information. The Agency has noted a particular interest among the media in reporting on how individual higher education institutions have performed in those procedures. However, the Agency has observed that the level of detail and analytical depth varies across expert panel reports, meaning that ensuring the quality and consistency of reports remains an ongoing challenge.

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- reflecting the legislative changes, the Agency now publishes its decision on the outcome of the procedure on its website (previously, the Agency published a recommendation submitted to the competent ministry for further action, as well as the Ministry's final decision)
- new, modernised and enhanced Agency website

Challenges

- continued efforts to ensure greater consistency in the quality of final reports across different expert panels
- enabling additional search and filtering options in the Overview of External Evaluation Procedures section (ENQA review panel recommendation and EQAR decision)

Evidence

- [Overview of external evaluation procedures](#)

5.7 ESG Standard 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.

The Agency for Science and Higher Education provides parties involved in external evaluation procedures with access to the legal remedies prescribed by law, ensuring access to an independent review of both procedural and substantive aspects of the evaluation process by the Appeals and Complaints Committee. In addition, the Agency enables all participants, particularly individuals involved in evaluation procedures, to submit a complaint concerning inappropriate conduct by persons or bodies representing the Agency in cases where no formal legal remedy is available. Complaint procedures are not administrative procedures but rather an internal mechanism designed to ensure professional, ethical and responsible conduct throughout all stages of the evaluation process.

In accordance with the Procedure for Submission and Assessment of Complaints in External Quality Evaluation Procedures, a complaint must be submitted in writing to the Director of the Agency within 15 days of the inappropriate conduct or of becoming aware of it, and no later than 60 days from the occurrence of the circumstances to which it relates. A complaint must contain basic information about the complainant, a description of the event and a signature, and may be submitted by post, electronically with a qualified signature, or in person. If the complaint is incomplete or unclear, the complainant is invited to amend it. Failure to do so results in the complaint being considered withdrawn. Repeated complaints that do not present any new facts will not be considered. The Director is required to assess the merits of the complaint within 30 days, taking into account statements pro-

vided by the persons concerned and the available documentation, and to provide the complainant with a written notification of the findings and any measures taken.

A complaint may be upheld, partially upheld or dismissed as unfounded. Where the allegations are confirmed, the Director may take appropriate measures within their authority. The Agency keeps an electronic record of all complaints, while ensuring compliance with personal data protection requirements and the rules governing the keeping of official records. Together with the formal legal remedies available, the complaint mechanism constitutes an important component of the Agency's accountability and quality assurance framework and contributes to stakeholders' confidence in external evaluation procedures.

In addition to the complaints mechanism, the Agency ensures that parties involved in external evaluation procedures have access to formal legal remedies prescribed by law. These remedies apply exclusively to quality assurance activities and enable parties to seek an independent review of both procedural and substantive aspects of the evaluation process.

Under the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Official Gazette No. 151/22), a party may file an appeal to the reasoned proposal of the Accreditation Council. The Appeals and Complaints Committee examines such appeals, investigates its validity and issues a written response to every claim within 15 days of receiving the appeal. The Committee operates through formal sessions convened and chaired by its president, and decisions are adopted by a majority vote. Its internal functioning is regulated by its Rules of Procedure. Once the Agency issues its final decision, the legal framework provides an additional avenue for review. Pursuant to the same Act and the Administrative Disputes Act (Official Gazette No. 36/24), a party may initiate an administrative lawsuit before the competent administrative court. Through this judicial mechanism, the party may request a formal assessment of whether the procedure was carried out lawfully, impartially and in accordance with prescribed standards, as well as whether the final outcome is substantiated and procedurally correct.

Complaints address issues of conduct, while appeals and objections provide structured legal pathways for reviewing procedural and substantive aspects of evaluation outcomes. For activities outside the scope of external quality assurance, the Agency applies other appropriate mechanisms, ensuring that all operational areas remain subject to oversight and continuous improvement.

Figure 5: Complaints and appeals during period 2022 - 2025

Year	Complaints			Appeals			Total
	Accepted	Rejected	Partially	Accepted	Rejected	Partially	
2022	-	-	-	-	1	2	3
2023	-	-	-	1	1	2	4
2024	1	1	-	2	4	1	9
2025	-	-	-	2	-	-	2
Total	1	1	-	5	6	5	18

Changes and improvements since the previous ENQA review of the Agency

- Appeals and Complaints Committee established under the new legislative framework
- possibility to file an appeal or complaint and to initiate administrative court proceedings has been clearly defined, thereby ensuring effective legal protection for higher education institutions

Challenges

- monitoring the implementation and outcomes of appeal and complaint procedures and administrative court proceedings, and using the findings to support further improvements

Evidence

[Procedure for Submission and Assessment of Complaints in External Quality Evaluation Procedures](#)

6. Enhancement area (ESG 3.5)

Long term sustainability of an Agency depends on thoughtful allocation of resources, ongoing development of staff skills, and increased flexibility in how capacity is arranged. To ensure this goal, ASHE should strengthen the availability and flexibility of its resources to safeguard quality, ensure resilience, and respond effectively to evolving conditions in the higher education and research system. How to fulfil this task, remains challenging and represent area for enhancement.

Key question therefore is: How can ASHE strengthen and balance its resources with its expanding responsibilities?

HUMAN RESOURCES

The Agency considers investment in human resources to be its most important investment, placing particular emphasis on the education, training and continuous professional development of its staff.

ASHE currently employs **81 staff members**. Staffing levels have increased over the years, particularly during the last three years, as the Agency has been entrusted with additional responsibilities. The majority of employees (**76**) hold higher education qualifications, including nine staff members with a **doctoral degree (PhD)** and four with a **master's degree (MSc)**. Compared to 2021, when ASHE employed **71 staff members**, this represents a steady increase in both capacity and expertise.

Within the Sector of External Evaluation in Higher Education, 17 employees work directly on external quality assurance activities, supported by colleagues from other departments. All ASHE employees, including professional, administrative and technical staff, contribute to the effective and lawful operation of the Agency. They perform tasks related to quality assurance in higher education and research, support the decision-making processes of the Agency's governing bodies, and ensure transparent, accountable and efficient management. Staff provide professional support for external evaluation procedures, ensure compliance with legal and financial obligations, manage human resources and public procurement procedures, maintain information systems, and support communication with national and international stakeholders.

Staff Development and Professional Competencies

ASHE staff possess the competencies defined in the ENQA Quality Assurance Professional Competencies Framework, ensuring that their knowledge and skills are aligned with European quality assurance standards.

Assistant Directors and Heads of Organisational Units plan and coordinate staff professional development activities, encouraging employees to specialise in areas such as internal quality assurance, student-centred learning, online and e-learning, joint programmes, micro-credentials, qualifications frameworks and career development support.

Staff have participated in numerous training activities, seminars, workshops and webinars organised by ENQA, CEENQA, EUA, ECA, CHEA QA and APQN, as well as in staff exchange programmes within the ENQA and CEENQA networks.

ASHE staff have visited quality assurance agencies in Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Estonia, Latvia, Sweden, Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary, Israel, Slovenia and countries of the Balkan region, as well as in the United States and Kazakhstan.

ASHE also regularly hosts experts from Croatia and abroad, including representatives from Latvia, Azerbaijan, North Macedonia and Montenegro, who delivered lectures and workshops for Agency staff.

Employees in other services and departments also participate continuously in training activities covering a range of professional fields, including legislative developments, finance and accounting, EU funds and project preparation, public procurement, internal quality assurance in the public sector, digitalisation, and the recognition of foreign qualifications.

Over the past year, ASHE has intensified its internal training activities, with particular emphasis on supporting newly recruited staff.

Mentoring, integration and career development

Particular attention is paid to newly recruited staff. Each new employee is assigned a mentor who, together with the Head of Department, supports their integration into the organisational culture, familiarises them with the Agency's strategic direction, internal quality assurance system and job responsibilities, and monitors their professional development.

New employees initially participate in evaluation procedures as observers and, following appropriate training, assume the role of evaluation procedure coordinators.

ASHE is recognised as an organisation that provides a supportive and attractive working environment, offering opportunities for career advancement and professional development. The Agency has defined competency profiles for all positions and developed a performance management system that enables the transparent evaluation of staff performance and career progression.

Performance evaluation and current projects

As a public institution, ASHE evaluates staff performance in accordance with the Regulation on the Procedure, Criteria and Methods for Evaluating the Performance of Employees in Public Services, which provides the basis for assessing the efficiency, quality and results of their work.

The Agency is currently implementing the **ESF+ project Quality Assurance in Higher Education**, which includes targeted professional development activities for ASHE staff and members of its expert bodies in Croatia and abroad.

Through systematic investment in human resources, structured career development and alignment with European professional standards, ASHE continues to strengthen its capacities in pursuit of its mission to promote excellence and trust in higher education and research.

It is important to note that ASHE staff are actively involved in the development of **ENQA's new Quality Assurance Professional Competencies Framework** for professionals working in higher education quality assurance.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The main sources of funding for the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) are the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia and European Union funds.

The Agency's annual budget forms part of the State Budget allocated to the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth. The State Budget is adopted by the Croatian Parliament upon proposal of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, ensuring transparency and the long-term sustainability of funding.

ASHE independently prepares its budget proposal on the basis of expenditure in the previous budget year and planned activities for the forthcoming period, in accordance with the economic and fiscal policy guidelines established by the Ministry of Finance. The budget is planned on a rolling three-year basis.

Following the adoption of the State Budget by the Croatian Parliament, ASHE manages the allocated funds and independently determines how they are used to finance activities arising from its statutory responsibilities. This ensures financial independence and flexibility in implementing activities.

At the end of each calendar year, the Agency prepares a draft financial plan for the following year, together with projections for the subsequent two years, based on its planned activities.

In compliance with national legislation, ASHE produces quarterly and annual financial reports, as well as semi-annual and annual reports on the implementation of its financial plan. All financial reports are publicly available on the Agency's website.

The financial management of ASHE is based on the principles of transparency, accountability and sustainability. Through a combination of national and European funding sources, the Agency is able to achieve its strategic objectives and contribute to the enhancement of quality in higher education and research.

IT RESOURCES

The Agency continuously develops and enhances its information systems in order to ensure adequate resources for the effective implementation of external evaluation procedures and the efficient operation of the Agency as a whole. The Agency's digital infrastructure comprises several interconnected systems that support the various stages of quality assurance procedures, data management and internal operations.

As part of an ongoing ASHE project, a **user portal** is currently being developed with the aim of further digitalising and streamlining external evaluation procedures. The portal will enable higher education institutions to submit documentation electronically, while ASHE staff, domestic and international reviewers, and members of expert bodies will use the system to access relevant information and participate in evaluation procedures. This will significantly improve the efficiency and timeliness of procedures, as well as improve the availability and exchange of data among all stakeholders.

For the preparation of the analytic supplement in re-accreditation procedures, ASHE developed the **Information System for Indicators and Quality (ISPiK)**, which replaced the previous Mozvag system in 2024. ISPiK enables the structured collection and processing of data on higher education institutions, including information on study programmes, students, academic staff and research activities. The system is integrated with relevant national databases (ISVU and CRORIS), significantly facilitating the preparation of the analytic supplement and enhancing the reliability and comparability of data.

The **CEP database** is a key tool for managing and monitoring external evaluation procedures. It provides a comprehensive overview of all ongoing and completed procedures, including information on reviewers, supporting documentation and evaluation outcomes. Data from the CEP database are also used to connect with the European DEQAR database, thereby contributing to the transparency of quality assurance within the European Higher Education Area. In addition, CEP includes modules for monitoring operational plans, conducting risk analysis and maintaining records of staff training activities.

ASHE has for many years used the **Centrix** information system as its central solution for records and document management, in accordance with the Regulation on Office Management (Official Gazette No. 75/21). The system enables the electronic management of documents through their receipt, registration, classification, processing and archiving, as well as the monitoring of workflows and deadlines, thereby ensuring lawful, reliable and efficient operations.

The digitalisation of office operations is part of the wider digital transformation process of the Agency. In addition to the systems described above, a range of digital tools, including Microsoft 365 and SharePoint, to support internal collaboration, document management and information sharing. By continuously investing in the development of information systems and digital competences of employees, the Agency ensures adequate infrastructure and organisational support for the implementation of its activities.

ASHE is also a partner in the **Comprehensive Informatization of the Education System (CISOO)** project, led by the Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET). Other project partners include the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth and the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation. The project is implemented within the framework of the Effective Human Resources 2021–2027 Programme of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). Its objective is to develop new electronic services and enhance and interconnect existing services, registers and records across all levels of the education system, while also strengthening staff competencies and providing support in the use of enhanced and newly developed digital solutions.

ASHE is also a partner in the e-Universities project, coordinated by CARNET. The main objective of the project is to support the digital transformation of higher education in Croatia. The project is funded through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and runs from March 2022 to June 2026.

This integrated approach to the development of IT resources and the digitalisation of operations contributes directly to the quality, efficiency and timeliness of external evaluation procedures by enhancing transparency, accessibility and the reliability of data, while providing a robust basis for evidence-based and consistent decision-making.

In addition to conducting external evaluations, the Agency increasingly assumes other roles, such as system analysis, thematic analyses, policy development and adoption consultations, stakeholder involvement and international cooperation, which require more complex resources and competences. These expanding responsibilities require increasingly sophisticated resources and competencies. Resource constraints therefore have a direct impact on the Agency's ability to move beyond operational and procedural activities towards more developmental, analytical and strategic functions.

Key challenges related to the enhancement area

In recent years, ASHE has operated in an environment characterised by a continuously expanding scope of activities. While the number of staff has increased, this growth has not always kept pace with the expansion of responsibilities, new regulatory requirements and development projects.

Although the Agency employs a total of 81 staff members, 17 of whom are directly involved in evaluation procedures, the operational workload remains high. This is due not only to the number of procedures conducted but also to the increasing complexity of the Agency's work, including analytical tasks, international cooperation, methodological development, process digitalisation and participation in strategic initiatives at both national and European levels. In these circumstances, it is evident that the challenges relate not only to the volume of resources available but also to their allocation, flexibility and strategic management.

In addition to existing challenges related to human resource capacity, digital competencies and the rapid development of artificial intelligence, further complexity arises from the relatively large number of procedures conducted in parallel and the simultaneous involvement of a wide range of actors, including reviewers, higher education institutions, members of the Accreditation Council and Agency staff. Each of these actors has different roles, needs and levels of digital literacy, which increases coordination and support requirements.

This scale of activity also generates a significant logistical and administrative workload. Evaluation procedures involve a large volume of administrative documentation, including contracts, conflict of interest declaration, GDPR forms and other formal documents, which must be collected, verified, signed, stored and exchanged in compliance with applicable regulations. In addition, communication with reviewers and institutions, monitoring deadlines, managing document versions and ensuring the transparency of procedures require a high level of organisation and digital support.

Particularly demanding is the fact that some procedures are conducted as administrative proceedings, requiring strict procedural steps, precise documentation and legal certainty. In such an environment, reliance on fragmented or only partially digitalised processes increases the risk of errors, duplication of work and inconsistent practices.

At the same time, the development and maintenance of digital systems require additional investment in staff knowledge and competencies, particularly in the areas of digital tools, data management and understanding the legal aspects of digitalised procedures. In the context of the rapid development of artificial intelligence, staff must also be able to assess when and how AI can be used as a support tool and when it may pose risks to the quality, ethical integrity or legal certainty of procedures.

Limited flexibility in the use of financial resources further affects the Agency's ability to adapt. Although ASHE benefits from stable funding from the State Budget and European Union funds, the ability to adjust financial plans to actual needs is often constrained. This particularly applies to situations where the temporary engagement of experts, additional staff training or the accelerated development of digital solutions could significantly improve efficiency but cannot be implemented due to regulatory limitations.

Limited time available for staff competency development also represents an important challenge. Although ASHE invests systematically in professional development, operational pressures often restrict the time available for developing advanced competencies such as data analytics, project management methodologies, understanding of the international quality assurance context and strategic planning. This may slow the transition from a predominantly procedural approach to a more analytical and developmental one, which is central to the role ASHE seeks to play within the system.

The Agency's digital transformation, including the development of ISPiK, CEP and the user portal, contributes significantly to operational efficiency but also creates new expectations. Digital systems require continuous maintenance, upgrading and expert support, which further increases the need for specialised competencies and stable teams. In conditions of limited human resources, there is a

risk that development projects may take priority over analytical and strategic activities, or vice versa, which may lead to an imbalance in resource allocation.

It is particularly important to highlight the risk of dependence on key experts. In areas critical to quality and continuity of operations, such as coordination of evaluation procedures, methodological development and management of information systems, knowledge and experience are often concentrated among a limited number of staff members. This increases the risk of bottlenecks, operational disruptions and the loss of institutional knowledge in the event of staff turnover.

Ultimately, ESG 3.5 represents not only an area for enhancement but also an opportunity to support the Agency's transformation towards a model that places greater emphasis on the analytical, developmental and strategic dimensions of quality assurance. Through systematic resource planning, the strengthening of staff competencies and greater flexibility in capacity management, ASHE will be better positioned to ensure long-term stability, quality and resilience to changes in its operating environment, while continuing to fulfil its mission in higher education and research.

Challenges

- large number of parallel procedures
- significant administrative workload
- fragmented digital processes
- need for additional knowledge and digital competences
- expansion of responsibilities and new tasks not always matched by growth in human resources

7. SWOT analysis

Figure 6: SWOT analysis



8. Conclusions

Since the last ENQA review, the Agency for Science and Higher Education has undergone the most significant transformation since its establishment. The new legislative framework adopted in 2022 redefined the Agency's role within the higher education and research system by assigning it full responsibility for accreditation decisions, thereby strengthening its institutional independence. This change was not only technical in nature, but it transformed the way ASHE operates, how it is perceived within the system, and how trust in the quality of higher education is built in Croatia. At the same time, the new legislation placed a stronger emphasis on the development of internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions, creating a more balanced distribution of responsibilities between institutions and the Agency. This dual shift (strengthening internal responsibility and reinforcing external independence) is the fundamental guiding principle of all methodological and organisational enhancements that followed.

During this period, the Agency significantly improved its external evaluation procedures. The revised standards for initial accreditation and re-accreditation have been aligned with the ESG, the Croatian Qualifications Framework and contemporary European priorities, including open science, digitalisation and student-centred learning. The third cycle of re-accreditation, which began at the end of 2024, reflects the Agency's methodological maturity and its ability to ensure regulatory consistency while supporting the development of institutions. The system has been streamlined by discontinuing audits and the integration of doctoral programme evaluation into institutional re-accreditation procedures, reducing the administrative burden while increasing the substantive depth of evaluations. At the same time, the Agency has expanded its scope beyond the ESG framework to include the evaluation of qualifications within the Croatian Qualifications Framework, the non-administrative recognition procedure for foreign qualifications, and, since 2026, the evaluation of the implementation of programme contracts, thus becoming a key actor in the development of the higher education and research system as a whole.

The Agency's organisational development has evolved in parallel with these changes. The number of staff and the scope of professional functions have increased significantly, while the digitalisation of procedures has enabled more efficient coordination of a large number of parallel evaluations. New bodies have been established, including the Appeals and Complaints Committee and the Follow-up Committee, further strengthening mechanisms for legal protection and accountability. At the international level, ASHE has consolidated its position as an active and equal member of the European quality assurance community, with its compliance confirmed through registration on EQAR and membership in ENQA. The implementation of cross-border evaluation and the application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes further demonstrate the Agency's ability to operate in an international context and contribute to the European Higher Education Area.

Today, the Agency for Science and Higher Education is an institution that operates on the basis of a strong legislative framework, well-developed methodologies, professional expertise and international trust. The path ASHE has followed since its establishment has been characterised by continuous learning, adaptation and development. This Self-Assessment Report demonstrates that the Agency is entering a new phase of its development well positioned to respond to emerging challenges and seize the opportunities offered by the European Higher Education Area. In the years ahead, ASHE will continue to strengthen its role as a guarantor of quality, a partner to higher education institutions and an active participant in European developments, with the overarching aim of ensuring that the Croatian higher education and research system remains high-quality, transparent and internationally recognised.

Key messages

- **Independence and responsibility:** The new legislative framework has enabled the Agency to assume full responsibility for accreditation decisions, thus strengthening its professional and institutional independence.
- **Strengthening the quality culture:** The system is increasingly focused on the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions, while ASHE provides external oversight and support for continuous enhancement.

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- **Methodological maturity:** The revised procedures and standards reflect compliance with the ESG and European developments, while also taking into account national specificities.
 - **Organisational growth:** Increased staffing levels, digitalisation and the modernisation of internal structures have enabled the Agency to respond effectively to its expanding responsibilities.
 - **International recognition:** Active participation in European processes and cross-border evaluations demonstrates the Agency's international relevance.

Lessons learned

- **The growing scope of activities requires strategic resource management:** The increasing number of procedures and the expansion of the Agency's responsibilities generate administrative and operational pressures that require continuous capacity strengthening.
- **Digitalisation is necessary, but not sufficient:** Although digitalisation has significantly improved efficiency, the complexity of procedures requires further optimisation and continued investment in information systems.
- **Cooperation with institutions is a key success factor:** Feedback from higher education institutions and research institutes is crucial for developing procedures that are demanding, stimulating and feasible.
- **Building a quality culture is a long-term endeavour:** Systematic investment in both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms yields results, but requires patience, consistency and continuous training of all stakeholders.

9. Glossary of terms

ASHE Agency for Science and Higher Education

MSEY Ministry of Science, Education and Youth

MB Management Board

AC Accreditation Council

CroQF Croatian Qualifications Framework

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

EHEA European Higher Education Area

10. Overview of documents referenced with hyperlinks in the Self-Assessment Report

1. [Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science \(English version – internal translation\)](#)
2. [Act on Higher Education and Scientific Activity](#)
3. [Act on the Recognition of Foreign Educational Qualifications](#)
4. [Croatian Qualifications Framework](#)
5. [Initial accreditation of research institutes](#)
6. [Thematic evaluation](#)
7. [One-off evaluation](#)
8. [Evaluation of the implementation of programme contracts](#)
9. [Management Board](#)
10. [Accreditation Council](#)
11. [The Appeals and Complaints Committee](#)
12. [The Follow-up Committee](#)
13. [Statute of the Agency for Science and Higher Education](#)
14. [ASHE Mission](#)
15. [ASHE Strategy](#)
16. [ESG and non-ESG activities](#)
17. [Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short studies](#)
18. [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of undergraduate, graduate, integrated, specialist and short-cycle online study programmes](#)
19. [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of doctoral study programmes](#)
20. [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of initial accreditation of online doctoral studies](#)
21. [Quality standards for evaluation in the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
22. [Quality standards for evaluations in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
23. [Quality standards in the procedure of cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions](#)
24. [Quality standards in the accreditation procedure of joint study programmes offered by \(a\) Croatian and \(a\) foreign higher education institution\(s\)](#)
25. [Launch of the Public Consultation on the Standards and Procedure for the Initial Accreditation of Study Programmes](#)
26. [Public consultation on the proposal of documents and accompanying forms for conducting evaluations of higher education institutions and scientific institutes abroad](#)
27. [Public consultation on the proposal of documents for the implementation of the initial accreditation of the online doctoral studies](#)
28. [Online workshops on the “Initiation of the initial accreditation of study programmes”](#)
29. [The Agency for Science and Higher Education organised education on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
30. [ASHE organised training on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
31. [Education on the entry of data necessary for the preparation of the analytical supplement in the process of re-accreditation](#)
32. [ASHE organised training on the preparation of the self-evaluation report in the process of re-accreditation](#)
33. [Education on the entry of data necessary for the preparation of the analytical supplement in the process of re-accreditation](#)
26. [Ordinance on conducting the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
27. [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of studies](#)
28. [Instructions for conducting the procedure of initial accreditation of higher education institutions](#)
29. [Ordinance on the cross-border evaluation of higher education institutions](#)
30. [Ordinance on Implementation of Accreditation of Joint Studies of Domestic and/or Foreign Higher Education Institution\(s\)](#)
31. [Overview of external evaluation procedures](#)
32. [Appeals and Complaints Committee](#)
33. [Procedure for Submission and Assessment of Complaints in External Quality Evaluation Procedures](#)

11. Annexes

Annex 1 Compliance of quality standards used in evaluation procedures with Part 1 of the ESG

Annex 2 Overview of basic information on the system of higher education and research in the Republic of Croatia

Annex 3 Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science (English version – internal translation)

Annex 1. Alignment of the quality standards applied in external evaluation procedures with Part I of the ESG

Figure 7: Alignment of the quality standards applied in external evaluation procedures with Part I of the ESG

Mapping of ESG standards to accreditation procedures					
ESG standard	Re-accreditation of HEI / Cross-border evaluation of HEI	Initial Accreditation Study Programme / online Study Programme	Initial Accreditation HEI	Initial Accreditation Doctoral Studies / online Doctoral Studies	Accreditation of joint programmes according to EA
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.5	1.1, 1.2, 1.3	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4	1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 1.6	9
1.2. Design and approval of programmes	2.1, 2.2	1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7	1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7	1.2, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5	2.1, 2.3, 3
1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	3.1, 3.2	3.2, 3.4 (3.3, 3.5 for online programme)	3.2, 3.4	2.4	5
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	3.3	3.1	3.1	3.1, 3.2, 3.3	4
1.5. Teaching staff	4.1, 4.2, 5.1	4.1, 4.2 (4.3 for online programme)	4.1, 4.2, 5.1	4.1, 4.3	7
1.6. Learning resources and student support	3.4, 3.5, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6	3.3, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 (3.4, 4.6, 4.7 for online programme)	3.3, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5	1.5, 4.4, 4.5 (1.5, 4.4, 4.6 for online programme)	6, 7
1.7. Information management	1.3	1.3	1.5	1.2	
1.8. Public information	1.3, 1.5	1.4	1.6	3.3, 3.4	8
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	2.2	1.3	1.5	1.2	
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	1.5				

Annex 2. Overview of basic information on the system of higher education and research in the Republic of Croatia

The Croatian higher education and science system is relatively small in size but complex in its structure and regulation. The system is organized as a binary system, meaning that it consists of both university and professional higher education institutions. Some universities operate as integrated institutions with constituent units that do not have legal personality (10 universities), while others are non-integrated (4 universities).

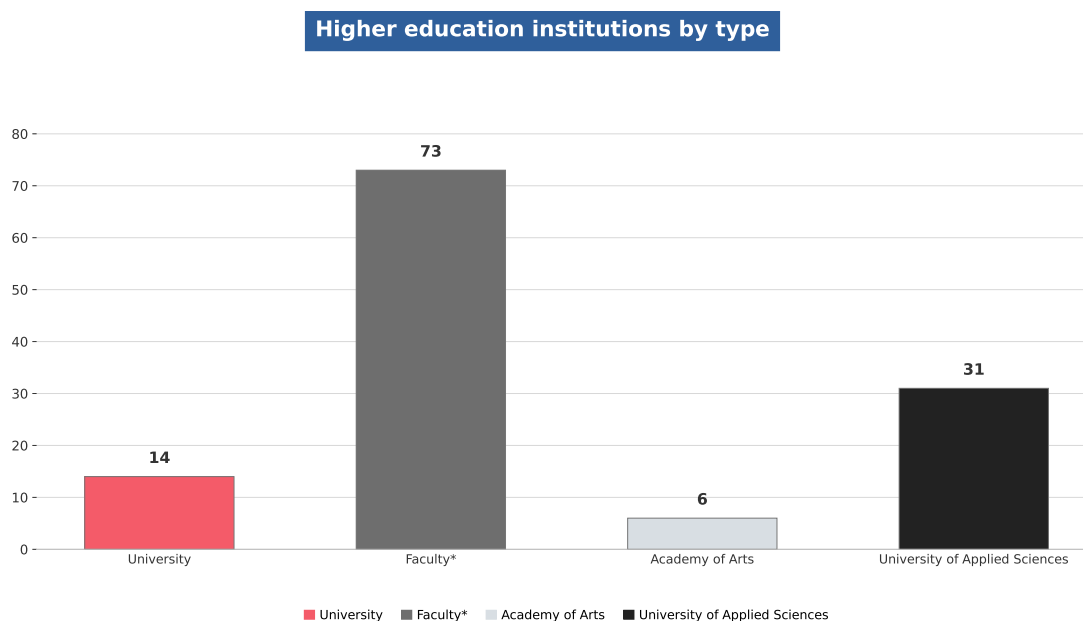
As a rule, the older and larger public universities are non-integrated and are located in Croatia's four largest cities – Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, and Osijek. Their constituent units include faculties and academies of arts with legal personality, as well as university departments without legal personality, amounting to a total of 84 constituent units. There are 107 public higher education institutions, including faculties and academies of arts within public universities, while there are 22 private higher education institutions. Of the total 14 universities, 10 are public and 4 are private. Private universities are relatively young institutions that began their development over the past twenty years following the introduction of the Bologna reform.

Despite its small size, the system is characterized by a large number of study programmes, which is the result of the long-term development of institutions, university autonomy, and diverse societal needs. This diversity of programmes is both a strength and a challenge, particularly in the context of quality assurance, rational planning, and long-term sustainability.

The system is financed through a combination of state budget allocations, institutional agreements, and the institutions' own revenues. The state provides core funding for public universities and public research institutes, while additional resources are obtained through research projects, tuition fees, international programmes, and cooperation with industry. In recent years, elements of performance-based funding and goal-oriented contractual arrangements have gradually been introduced to increase efficiency, strategic focus, and institutional accountability.

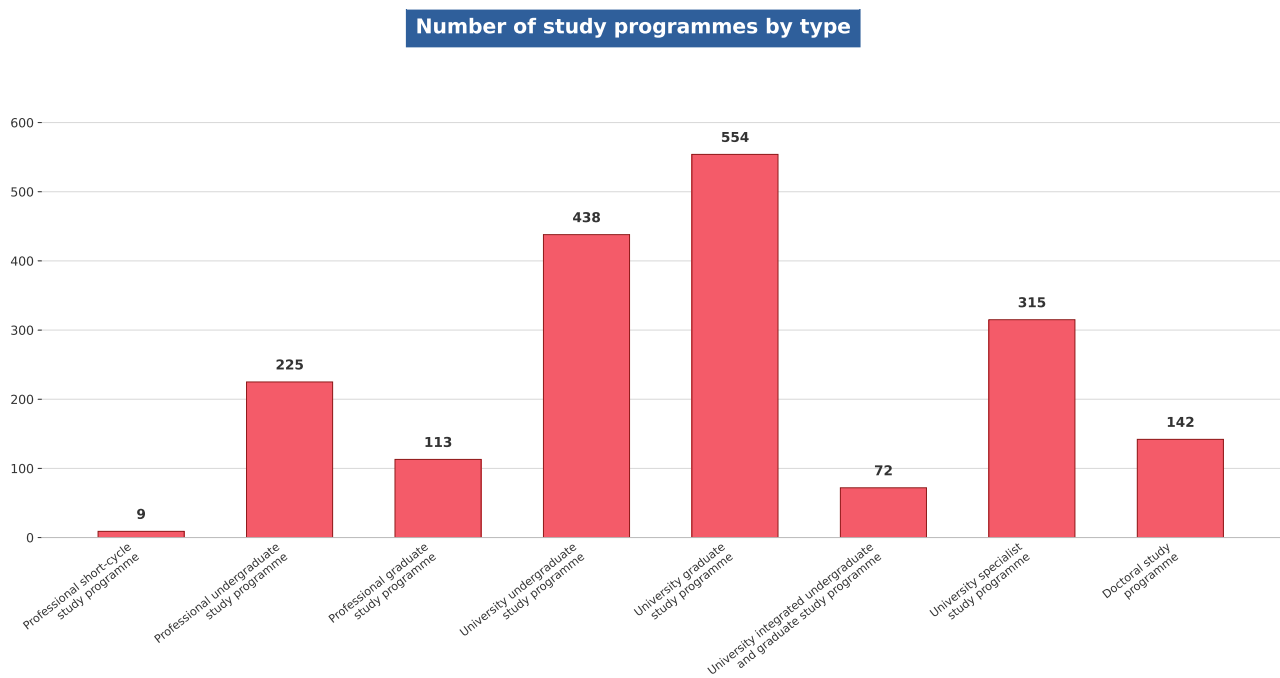
The Croatian scientific system consists of a network of 25 research institutes that operate as independent research organizations with their own legal personality. Although the system is relatively small, these institutes play an important role in the national research ecosystem by conducting basic, applied, and developmental research, participating in international projects, and providing expert and analytical support to government bodies and industry. Funding for research institutes is based on a combination of institutional funding from the state budget, project-based funding, international funds, and their own revenues. In recent years, reforms have been introduced to strengthen programme financing and enhance result-oriented approach.

Figure 8: Number of higher education institutions and study programmes in Croatia



*Faculties without legal personality operating with the status of university departments are also included in the count.
Data source: Register of Higher Education Institutions of the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (MSEY).

Figure 9: Number of study programmes by type



Data source: Register of Higher Education Institutions of the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth.

Figure 10: Number of students by type of institution

Number of students by type of institution		
Type of institution	2024/2025	%
University	132.615	86%
Public universities	125.155	81%
Private universities	7.460	5%
University of applied sciences	21.986	14%
Public universities of applied sciences	14.521	9%
Private universities of applied sciences	7.465	5%
TOTAL	154.601	100%



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