




SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

**OF THE SLOVENIAN QUALITY
ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER
EDUCATION**

for 2015



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All the staff, members of the Agency Council and the Director of the Agency participated in the preparation of the self-evaluation report.

The Director of the Agency confirmed the self-evaluation report in May 2016.

The Agency Council gave its consent to the self-evaluation report at its 103rd meeting on 16 June 2016.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEENQA – Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

CeQuInt – a project intended to develop the methodology for the assessment of the quality of internationalization

ECA – European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education

ECApedia – web application combining knowledge in the field of higher education with special emphasis on quality assurance

EEEP – ECA Expert Exchange Platform

eNakvis – information system of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

ENQA – The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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

ESF – European Social Fund

ESU – European Student Union

EQAR – The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education

eVŠ – Record-keeping and analytical information system for higher education in the Republic of Slovenia

JOQAR – Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded

MULTRA – Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes

SER – self-evaluation report of the Agency

SSU – Slovenian Students' Union

THE – transnational higher education

HEA – Higher Education Act

MISSION, VISION, VALUES AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF THE AGENCY

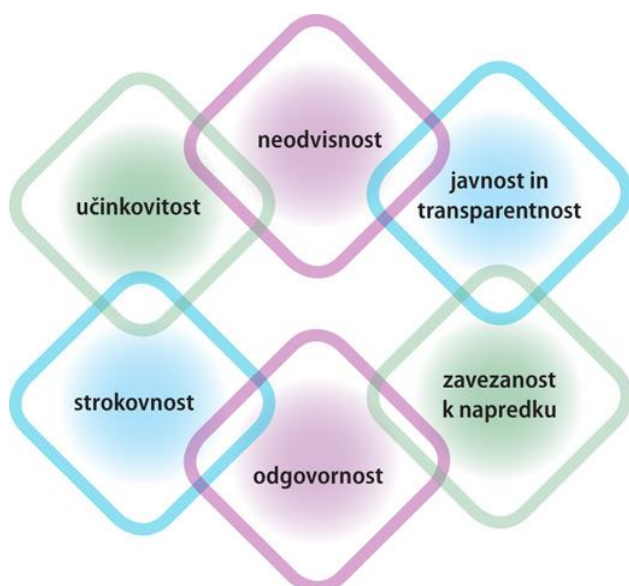
Mission

The Agency provides for development and operation of the quality assurance system in the Slovenian higher education area. It operates responsibly, both formally and contextually, and counsels all stakeholders and participants in tertiary education in line with European and global development trends.

Vision

The Agency shall, with its system of quality assurance development, contribute to higher education in Slovenia being of high quality in terms of education and research, internationally recognizable, competitive and equally integrated in the global higher education area.

Values



Strategic objectives of the Agency until 2016 are:

- development and functioning of the quality assurance system;
- monitoring progress and strengthening of higher education quality;
- presenting the role, importance and quality of operation of the Agency in the public for better recognition;
- co-creating and developing higher education policy in the field of quality, promoting the quality of transnational education;
- admission of the Agency to international associations (ENQA and EQAR);
- providing high quality consulting services of the Agency by professionally qualified personnel.

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1. ABOUT THE SELF-EVALUATION OF THE AGENCY IN 2015

The self-evaluation of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter: the Agency) for 2015 was conducted for the first time by taking into consideration the new quality manual which was adopted at the beginning of this year. The period covered in the assessment of the quality assurance system has not changed; in accordance with the previous self-evaluation periods it lasts from 1 March 2015 to 29 February 2016.

We are finding this year as well that the self-evaluation report for 2015, regardless of the date, determined in the Quality Manual, has been adopted slightly later. There are many reasons for it, the most important is the uncertain financing of the Agency after the expiration of the ESF project (October 2015) and the efforts to secure stable financing and preserve jobs and the related late adoption of the work plan for 2015, whose obligatory element is the action plan for self-evaluation of the Agency. It was finally adopted in November 2015, shortly after the negotiations for the future financing of the Agency were concluded, the resources for its operation were assured and the budget was confirmed.

For the first time, the Agency has been assessing its work as a full member of The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; hereinafter ENQA); it became a member in March 2015.

1.1 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SELF-EVALUATION

The action plan for the self-evaluation of the Agency in 2015 (hereinafter: the action plan) has been constructed a bit differently compared to previous years; namely, according to areas of quality (assessments), determined in the Quality Manual, whereby those subareas were considered where the most opportunities for the improvement of the operation of the Agency were discovered. The action plan also considers in the determination of the activities and the assignments for the improvement of the work of the Agency – as well as in the previous self-evaluation periods – the recommendations of the international group of evaluators, this time the group for the admission to ENQA.

Even though the action plan is much shorter than the one for 2014, it was not possible to carry out every assignment because of the short deadlines and the late adoption of the plan. In addition, the Agency considered a much larger number of applications as in the previous self-evaluation period, the work was also affected by the insecurity of the financing and the jobs of the majority of the technical members of the staff. The Agency also had to carry out unplanned assignments, related mainly with the two audits by the Court of Audit. The action plan for 2015 includes activities and assignments for the improvement of the work of the Agency in all five areas of quality assurance from the Quality Manual:

a) accreditations and external evaluations: improvement of the quality of accreditation procedures and the decisions, and calibration of work;

b) internal quality assurance system of the Agency: reorganization of the work at the Agency, enhancement of the efforts for a peaceful resolution of disputes and the improvement of communication among the internal stakeholders of the Agency;

c) external quality assurance system of the Agency: organization of regular consultations, conferences and workshops for stakeholders (for the improvement of quality assurance systems), guidelines for writing self-evaluation reports (SER) of institutions / colleges, regulation of the operation of the Agency in a specialized act, implementation of the training for candidates for experts, enhancement of the advisory role of the Agency;

d) criteria and other regulations: draft of the Agency's strategy until 2020, guidelines for the improvement of accessibility and flexibility of the contents for persons with special needs, interpretation of the accreditation criteria;

e) information system and notifying: establishment of a user-friendly information system (eNakvis).

One of the most important tools for the assessment of operation of the Agency is taking surveys with stakeholders. For 2015 we surveyed internal (staff, Agency Council) as well as external stakeholders (experts, higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges); the latter are surveyed every two years. Compared to previous years, the questionnaires have been changed to take into consideration the quality indicators according to areas of quality assurance from the Manual. The questionnaires again, the same as in 2014, also include questions regarding the good and bad practices of the Agency; the respondents also gave suggestions for its improvement.

In the preparation of the self-evaluation report we considered, in addition to the findings obtained from the analyses of the questionnaires and the findings of the international group of ENQA evaluators, mainly the information about the operation of the Agency, obtained during the visits of institutions / colleges, meetings with various stakeholders, monthly meetings of the Council, meetings with the staff, conferences, with the participation in domestic and international project groups and interdepartmental groups etc.

1.2 STRUCTURE OF THE SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

Central chapters in the self-evaluation report are:

- the second chapter: development and work of the Agency – assessment of the internal quality assurance system of the Agency and the development in the basic areas of its operation;
- the third chapter: assessment in accordance with Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG standards; i.e. the standards for which the ENQA international group of evaluators did not find substantial compliance;

- the fourth chapter: final assessment and opportunities for improvement containing measures for the following self-evaluation period and SWOT analysis.

The analysis of survey questionnaires is attached to the report.

2. DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATION OF THE AGENCY in 2015

2.1 ADMISSION TO ENQA

In March 2015, the Agency became a full member of ENQA. By achieving that it obtained its second very important strategic objective (the first was the entry to European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education; hereinafter EQAR, achieved in fall 2013), which was set to be achieved by 2016 and one of the objectives from the National Higher Education Programme (NHEP2011-20).

On 18 March, the Agency received a letter from the ENQA president, informing the Agency that the ENQA board on 6 March 2015 made a positive decision regarding the full membership of the Agency for five years. The letter also included recommendations, mainly regarding the regulation of the financing, and a notification that the Agency will have to report on it in one year, in March 2016. The Agency has done that earlier, it informed ENQA and EQAR electronically on 8 January 2016 that the financing issue has been resolved.

2.2 OVERVIEW OF THE WORK OF THE BODIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL UNITS OF THE AGENCY

In this self-evaluation period, the Agency, in addition to the permanent assignments, among them accreditations and external evaluations of higher education institutions, study programmes and higher vocational colleges, the self-evaluation of the Agency, cooperation with stakeholders, focused on:

- negotiations for additional budgetary resources after the expiration of the ESF resources and the related preservation of the number of employees;
- regulation of the status of employees and their relationships;
- training of the candidates for experts of the Agency;
- preparation of the Agency's new information system (eNakvis);
- amendments to the Higher Education Act (HEA);
- preparation of the draft of the specialized act regarding the Agency;
- work in the EIQAS project;
- international cooperation;
- assignments related mainly with the audits by the Court of Audit.

Because the action plan for 2015 was adopted late, some activities indicated in the plan only just started and shall continue in the following self-evaluation period. It was not possible to do all assignments because of the slow amending of the HEA; among them are accreditation criteria and its interpretation as well as the guidelines for self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions;

however, assignments have been done which were not included in the action plan.

Overview of assignments performed according to the areas of quality assurance:

a) accreditations and external evaluations:

- more regular calibration of work,
- preparation of the agreed-up instruction for the elimination of procedural inconsistencies;

b) internal quality assurance system:

- improvement of cooperation among the staff and the general work atmosphere,
- seminars and additional education regarding ethics, integrity and conflicts of interest, provisions of the General Administrative Procedure Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 24/06 – official consolidated text, 105/06 – General Administrative Procedure Act-1, 126/07, 65/08, 8/10 and 82/13; hereinafter GAPA);

c) external quality assurance system:

- consultation at the fifth anniversary of the operation of the Agency on 13 November 2015,
- two-day visit of CEENQA members on 22 and 23 May 2015 in Ljubljana (the Agency hosted the meeting),
- multi-day training of candidates for experts of the Agency in November 2015,
- training of students-candidates for experts at the Slovenian Students' Union (hereinafter: SSU) in April 2015,
- work in the consortium of the EIQAS project and the organization of the 5-day training of stakeholders from various countries in December 2015 in Ljubljana,
- lectures and workshops for internal evaluators of the University of Primorska in March and June 2015,
- visits to various European quality assurance agencies for higher education,
- active participation in the Opening Up initiative, advocating for open education (not only in Slovenia and Europe, but worldwide); emphasis is on innovative education and learning for all, with new technologies and openly available learning resources;

d) criteria and other regulation:

- work in an interdepartmental working group for amendments to HEA (transition to institutional re-accreditation, more detailed determination of conditions for the establishment of higher education institutions, accreditation procedures, introduction of sample evaluations ...),
- preparation of the first draft of a specialized act regarding the Agency,

- participation in the preparation of the SQF,
 - preparation of the instructions for the preparation of THE agreements,
 - change of the Rules of Procedure regarding the operation of the Agency Council;
- e) information system (eNakvis) and notifying:
- preparation of new electronic forms (applications) for all types of accreditations including the instructions for filling them out and the preparation for testing in the school environment.

2.2.1 Agency Council as a first-instance decision-making body

The Agency Council (hereinafter: the Council) was active as a ten-member body in this self-evaluation period, as the government failed to appoint an alternate member instead of a member who did not attend more than 5 meetings of the Council. In January 2016 the Council was informed about the fact that in the spring of 2016 the term of four members shall expire, one must still be appointed by the government, and the term of the students' representative also expired. The Agency urged the representative organizations to appoint new members of the Council. SSU already appointed its member, other organizations must do it by April or July 2016.

From March 2015 to February 2016 the Council met at ten regular meetings (89th to 98th meeting).

Decisions in accreditation and evaluation procedures

368 applications were submitted to the Agency in the self-evaluation period, which is 40% more than in the previous self-evaluation period:

- 294 for the accreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions (159 applications in the previous period),
- 70 for transformations of study programmes,
- 4 for external evaluation of higher vocational colleges.

The Council decided on 150 applications for accreditation and re-accreditation of a study programme or a higher education institution:

Positive decisions:

- initial accreditation was granted to 20 study programmes (which is the same as in the previous self-evaluation period),
- re-accreditation was granted to 121 study programmes (which is 48 more as in the previous self-evaluation period),
- re-accreditation was granted to 4 private higher education institutions (one fewer than in the previous self-evaluation period).

Negative decisions:

- it denied the application for the accreditation of 1 study programme, because the material conditions for its implementation were not met. The applicant changed the location of implementation of the study programme during the accreditation procedure for the study programme, and the location was not accredited in the accreditation procedure of the institution;
- it did not grant re-accreditation to 8 study programmes because:

- of inconsistencies, indicated in the first decision of the Agency Council with which it granted re-accreditation for a shorter period, were not eliminated, in addition it did not meet the criteria from all the areas of assessment;
- the study programmes were never implemented for long enough or at all, for it to be able to check the quality of their organization and implementation and the ensuring of progress.

The Council did not grant an accreditation or re-accreditation to 9 study programmes, meaning that there was 6% of negative decisions. During this self-evaluation period it did not make any decisions regarding re-accreditation for a shorter period.

Requirements of the Council for supplementations of the reports by the groups of experts and the supplementations to applications

Compared to previous self-evaluation periods, the Council required in even more cases that reports by the groups of experts or application forms be supplemented:

- in 15 procedures for the accreditation of study programmes it required from groups of experts to supplement their reports, mainly because of the responses of applicants to the reports in which they (substantially) changed the applications; in one procedure because of the instruction by the Appeal Committee, mainly regarding:
 - learning contents of study programmes and the (in)consistency of the anticipated professional title with the content of a programme,
 - prevention of over-burdening of the teaching staff and regarding habilitation,
 - inclusion of students to scientific-research work through applicable projects of the institution and informing the students,
 - internal quality assurance system of the institution,
 - monitoring the needs for graduates of a study programme.
- in 27 procedures the Council required from the applicant to supplement the application and answer to the report by the group of experts. The reasons were mainly:

in initial accreditation procedures:

- contextual imbalance of the study programme regarding the employment opportunities and professional title of graduates; the institution promises competences which will not be ensured by the contents of the study,
- supplementation of study plans with applicable literature,
- staffing, proof regarding the references of the instructors of subjects; publications, scientific-research work, inclusion of students,

- coordination of enrolment conditions and the conditions in case of enrolment limits with HEA,
- failure to comply with the criteria regarding higher education libraries and library materials – submission of concrete proof for access to databases and information resources, suitability of library staffing;

in re-accreditation procedures:

- preparation of action plans for the elimination of the found inconsistencies and the opportunities for improvement regarding:
 - updates of study programmes in accordance with the recommendations by the groups of experts,
 - guaranteeing mobility of students which shall enable them a full recognition of the performed obligations at foreign higher education institutions,
 - systemic solutions in the monitoring of the employability of graduates according to the national qualifications framework, connection with the job market,
 - internal quality assurance system of the institution: inclusion of representatives of external stakeholders to the quality assurance committee; raising awareness among all stakeholders about the meaning of quality and the filling out of survey questionnaires, expansion of the set of questions regarding the obtained course-specific competences; monitoring the quality of study programmes based on the strategy of the institution, action plan, indicators, actions for improvements for the conclusion of the circle of quality, obtaining information about the satisfaction with the study (as well of foreign exchange students),
 - elimination of overlapping of lectures and exams,
 - implementation of actions to encourage students to finish their study,
 - more intensive inclusion of students into research and professional work,
 - balancing the burdening of higher education teachers and staff,
- inadequacy of the scientific-research work,
- inadequately arranged mentorship for the practice,
- changes of names of study programmes and professional titles of graduates without an applicable change of certain competences and curriculums,
- preparation of study plans to enter all the changes which were created after the initial accreditation of study programmes.

The Council also decided on the transformations of study programmes (it granted the consent in 11 cases, in 1 case it denied the consent because the proposed change of the professional title was not consistent with the name and field of the study programme); about the transformation of the fields of study according to

KLASIUS and ISCED, introduction of a new field; about dislocated units of institutions, changes of locations of the implementation of study programmes and additional locations.

The Agency also performs external evaluations of higher vocational colleges. The Council issued a positive opinion regarding compliance with the legally prescribed standards for 3 colleges, for one it issued an opinion with reservation, namely because of the regulation of employment for the study and students' officer as determined in Article 26 of the Post-Secondary Vocational Education Act (PSVEA). It confirmed the plan for external evaluations of colleges up to 2020 and the plan for 2016.

The Council also decided on the record-keeping of transnational higher education – THE (the record contains the entry of 2 THE agreements).

Consideration of the transformations of study programmes and the reduction of the number of contact hours

Because of the findings in accreditation procedures and the increasingly more common complaints by students and higher education teachers, the Council paid special attention to the inadmissible reduction of contact hours in the full-time and part-time study, while the work with students is not adapted to it, nor are the study plans and programmes. Other changes are also so extensive that they are substantially different from the accredited situation, and they are not contextually justified in the self-evaluation findings of the higher education institution and did not arise because of the actualization of study contents or the update of the study. The Council emphasized that the transformation of study programmes because of saving measures, precarity of higher education teachers and other possible issues is not acceptable for the Agency; in addition, it is not possible to introduce changes in the middle of the study year.

The Council wrote a special letter addressed to all universities and private higher education institutions warning them of the lack of quality, ad hoc prepared and unlawful transformations of study programmes which cannot be considered promptly by the Agency, but it shall affect the assessment and the decisions in re-accreditation procedures of higher education institutions. It explained to the institutions that they are adopting major transformations of study programmes differently as prescribed by HEA (paragraph five, Article 32). The Council also informed the institutions about the fact that the Court of Audit also warns about a severely abridged implementation of part-time study.

Consideration of appeals

Compared to the previous self-evaluation period the number of appeals was significantly reduced, there were less repeated procedures in matters which were returned to renewed decision-making of the Council by Administrative Court of

the Republic of Slovenia (hereinafter: Administrative Court) or the Appeal Committee. The Council:

- was informed about 3 judgments of the Administrative Court of the Republic of Slovenia, in one the court denied the claim and confirmed the decision of the Council, in two matters it returned the matters for renewed decision-making; with 1 decision of the Appeal Committee with which the appeal was denied and the decision of the Council confirmed;
- discussed 5 appeals against its decisions, of which 3 were given to the Appeal Committee (which is 6 fewer than in the previous period), 2 times it decided on the appeal, of which it discarded 1, and changed its decision in 1 matter.

a) Appeals by applicants

The Council gave only three matters in accreditation procedures to the Appeal Committee for decision-making. Compared to the previous self-evaluation period there were 6 fewer of such appeals, compared to 2013 there were 10 fewer. This can be attributed to the fact that the Council considered more consistently the recommendations of the Appeal Committee and the provisions of the General Administrative Procedures Act, and consistently determined the correct and full actual situation before making the final decision. Where necessary, oral hearings were carried out, additional written calls to applicants to supplement their applications and the supplemental opinion of the groups of experts, also after the submission of their final reports. The Council continued the practice of sending responses of applicants to the reports made by the groups of experts in the procedures of accreditation of study programmes to prepare an additional supplemental opinion which is comparable with the preparation of the final evaluation report in re-accreditation procedures and it gives the applicants the possibility of equal consideration in procedures in accordance with the possibilities given by the General Administrative Procedure Act.

In the decision-making in five renewed procedures in which the Appeal Committee eliminated the decision of the Council and returned the matter for renewed decision-making, the Council in two matters after a supplemented procedure changed its decision and granted accreditation to the study programme, which initially failed to earn the accreditation, in one matter it did not change its decision, two procedures are still on-going.

A decision has not yet been made in the procedures regarding the judgments of the Administrative Court with which the matter was returned for renewed decision-making.

b) Appeals by stakeholders

Stakeholders in higher education, students and higher education teachers, mainly made complaints because:

- of irregularities in the implementation of study programmes (mainly the reduction of contact hours, in some cases even for 25%, which is significant for appeals in previous self-evaluation periods), and
- deprivation of students' rights (representation in the bodies of the institutions, implementation of the practical part of the study programme, inappropriate premises and equipment, employability of graduates).

Based on that the Council introduced the procedure of extraordinary evaluation of 17 study programmes, a procedure against 16 study programmes was later stopped, because it was determined that the conditions for extraordinary evaluation no longer apply. In November 2015, it appointed a special committee to consider the initiatives for the introduction of extraordinary evaluation procedures which shall propose to the Council whether or not to introduce such procedures.

Deciding about the experts

a) entry into the register of the Agency

13 experts were entered in the register of experts by the Council, of which one was entered at the Council's own invitation, while others were entered after a successfully completed training at the visits of institutions / colleges. As of 29 February, there are a total of 202 experts entered in the register of experts, 12 of which are students.

The Council changed its decision that because of a lack of students in the register; candidates-students are only suitable for entry into the register if they passed the first part of the training carried out by the Agency based on an invitation by the committee for the opening of applications of candidates for entry into the register. The underlying reason is the finding that despite the training at SSU they are still not skilled at assessments at institutions / colleges.

b) appointing groups of experts

Despite an extraordinary, a 40 percent increase in the number of re-accreditation procedures of study programmes, during this self-evaluation period the Council appointed 78 groups of experts for assessments in accreditation and evaluation procedures which is 10 fewer as in the previous period. There are fewer because a lot of re-accreditation procedures were joined because the groups must assess more study programmes.

Consideration of internal legal acts and strategic documents

During this self-evaluation period the Council confirmed:

- the self-evaluation report of the Agency for 2014;
- business report for 2014;
- work and financial plan with an action plan for 2015;
- change of the Rules of Procedure regarding the work of the Council.

In October 2015, upon discussing the work and financial plan for 2015 which was prepared late because of the regulation of the stable financing of the Agency, it warned that for the future it should be prepared at the beginning of each year. It also emphasized that a development strategy of the Agency for the period from 2016 to 2020 needs to be updated.

The Council acquainted itself with the change of Article 26 of the Decision on the Establishment of the Agency. Based on the findings of both the Court of Audit that meeting fees are payment for work and that members of the Council should not be paid from two sources, and the Legislation Office of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia that it would be necessary, to avoid different

interpretations, to strike paragraph one of Article 26, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia struck this paragraph from the Decision for the Establishment of the Agency. In September 2015, the Council changed the Rules of Procedure of the Council accordingly.

The Council found on several occasions that it needs to regulate transnational higher education (THE), mainly the exercising of the students' rights. Since it has no competences in this area other than the entry of the THE agreements into the register, the working group appointed in the previous self-evaluation period, prepared instructions for the drafting of the agreement on the implementation of THE. The Council considered them in February 2016.

It also adopted the text of a public call for candidates for deputies of members of the Appeal Committee and the text of a public tender for candidates for entry into the register of experts.

2.2.2 Appeal Committee as a second-instance decision-making body

In 2015, the trend of the reduction of the numbers of appeals by applicants was evident; only 3 were submitted. As indicated on page 15, 6 appeals fewer were submitted than in 2014 (9) and 10 fewer as in 2013 (13). The Appeal Committee met at two meetings at which it decided on all three matters which they received from the Council for a competent resolution. In 2015, the appellants mainly exercised all three grounds for appeal specified in paragraph one of Article 237 of the General Administrative Procedure Act. The decisions of the Council were therefore contested because of the claimed violations of the rules of material law, wrong or incomplete determination of the actual situation, and violations of the rules of the procedure.

The Appeal Committee upheld the appeal in two procedures, eliminated the contested decision and returned the matter to the Council for renewed decision-making. In both matters it found that there was a procedural violation as the Council decided based on the report by the group of experts which did not contain the appellants responses to the report. In the third discussed matter it confirmed the decision of the Agency Council to re-accredit the programme for a shorter period. Until the time of the preparation of this report, the Agency does not have any information whether the appellant used judicial protection and initiated the administrative dispute procedure against the decision of the Council which was confirmed by the Appeal Committee.

2.2.3 Director

During this self-evaluation period the main concern of the Director was to ensure stable financing of the Agency. On 31 October 2015 the ESF project expired through which the basic activity of the Agency was financed (accreditations and evaluations and the work of the experts of the Agency, information system,

salaries for 14 of the total of 23 technical members of the staff, that is the majority). In first five years, the Agency was mostly financed from the ESF resources; therefore, much more money from the budget needed to be ensured for its work and the employments in the future. Negotiations with the ministry competent for finance were protracted; only in August 2015 were the budgetary resources for the operation of the Agency guaranteed.

The Director did important work in the following areas:

a) international cooperation

International cooperation has been enhancing with each year. The Director has an important role in quality assurance institutions; on 4 December 2015 he was elected as vice president of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education; hereinafter: ECA); since 2014 he has been the vice president of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education; hereinafter: CEENQA). As CEENQA vice president he organized the annual meeting of the members of this organization; it was held in Ljubljana on 22 and 23 May 2015 (CEENQA workshop and general meeting).

The Director made many business trips abroad, he attended:

- the conference of quality assurance agencies, ministries competent for education and higher education institutions on the topic of joint study programmes in Salamanca, Spain;
- the 6th general ENQA meeting in Dublin;
- he visited the Estonian quality assurance agency EKKA and the Bulgarian quality assurance agency NEAA, Portuguese quality assurance agency A3ES within the EIQAS project;
- regular meetings of the ECA executive board.

He promptly reported about his work to the staff at the Agency at the weekly meetings.

b) working conditions at the Agency

The Director continues with the weekly work meetings with the staff at which the minutes are also done. It is a prompt exchange of information and an agreement regarding future work. Compared to the previous self-evaluation period, the meetings have become more efficient, the staff actively participates and makes joint decisions.

The Director had a lot of work with the audits by the Court of Audit in this self-evaluation period. In addition to the obligations regarding the second audit by the Court of Audit, discussion of the draft and the proposal of the audit report "Evaluation, accreditation and granting concession procedures in higher and higher educational education", he was also dealing with an unexpected issue regarding the findings of the audit report for 2011, specifically, the corrective

measure imposing the Agency to collect the amounts for meeting fees paid in excess because of the so-called "double meeting fees", as indicated in the media.

The Director responded to the media questions and accusations about the non-collection of "amount paid in excess" almost daily, and lastly published a lengthy response at the Agency's website explaining that the Agency did not execute this action because it was paying the members of the Council for work performed in accordance with HEA provisions and the Decision on the Establishment of the Agency, of which it notified the Court of Audit in time. After nine months, the president of the Court of Audit informed the public that the collection is still ongoing and that the Agency failed to comply with the requirements of the Court.

According to the Director, the Agency found itself in such a position due to poorly prepared legislation. The Agency is not a public agency, but an institution, such as the Court of Audit, Corruption Prevention Commission, Constitutional Court, Public proxy.... Its operation is regulated by HEA (and not a specialized act as is the case with other abovementioned institutions), among other also the payment for the work of the Council. Article 51.n clearly stipulates that the members of the Council are entitled to the payment and reimbursement of costs for work, moreover, it is determined that the Council shall define "the method and amount of payment and reimbursement of costs".

The Agency again took the position that it acted in accordance with HEA provisions and the Decision on the Establishment of the Agency. The same provision in HEA was also in Article 26 of the Decision on the Establishment of the Agency, additionally it was determined that the members of the Council and the Appeal Committee are entitled to meeting fees in accordance with a regulation regulating meeting fees and the reimbursement of costs in public funds, public agencies, public institutions and public economic institutions. There was a collision in this part between paragraphs one and two of Article 26 of the Decision on the Establishment, therefore, paragraph one of the latter was stricken in the summer of 2015 (31 July 2015, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 57).

The Agency was also visited by the budget inspector who, unlike the Court of Audit, does not only issue opinions but imposes sanctions. In his report dated 9 June 2015 it is specified that there were no irregularities in the payment of the meeting fees.

2.2.4 Staff in the General Affairs Department and the Quality Department

In October 2015, the Agency, despite a heavily increased number of re-accreditation procedures for study programmes which are among the most demanding, continued its work with three technical members of the staff fewer.

The Council gave authorization for conducting accreditation procedures to two technical members of the staff of the Agency who previously did other work.

The assignments of employees in both departments are intertwined in several cases and are therefore not listed according to departments.

The most important assignments, in addition to conducting accreditation and evaluation procedures, preparing reports regarding procedures for the meetings of the Council and the Appeal Committee, decisions on accreditation, opinions regarding external evaluations, technical help for the management in staffing and financial matters, resolving legal issues, assignments from the action plan and other permanent assignments done by the technical members of the staff of the Agency, are evident from previous chapters, as the materials discussed by the Council and the Appeal Committee are prepared by the staff. Therefore, only some of the most important assignments are listed below:

- self-evaluation report of the Agency for 2014;
- assignments related with the organization and participation at various events: two-day hosting of CEENQA in Ljubljana, the 5th anniversary of the Agency, workshops within the EIQAS project in Ljubljana;
- work in the EIQAS project;
- work in the interdepartmental working group for the preparation of the act amending HEA and the preparation of proposals for changes;
- preparation of the first draft of a specialized act regarding the Agency;
- creation of forms for electronic applications in accreditation and evaluation procedures for eNakvis;
- preparation of materials, responses and objection to the proposal of the audit report by the Court of Audit and the materials for other inspection services;
- preparation of the materials for negotiations related with the financial situation of the Agency;
- additions to the programme for the training of candidates for experts of the Agency and their education;
- active participation with lectures in the training of experts-students at SSU, internal evaluators at institutions and other consultations of external stakeholders (strategic consultations, quality assurance consultations) ...

Legislation

Unlike the previous self-evaluation period, the ministry competent for education invited the Agency to actively cooperate in the amending of HEA. The minister appointed a representative of the Agency to the interdepartmental working group for amendments to HEA, in addition to all other stakeholders (representatives of the rectors' conference, private higher education institutions, students, the economy, Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Youth Academy...). The

interdepartmental working group (hereinafter: working group) started working in September 2015 and met nine times at working meetings lasting several hours by February 2016, when the proposal was given for public discussion. The proposals for the update of HEA (hereinafter: act amending HEA) were discussed by the working group of the Agency for the preparation of a specialized act regarding the Agency, update of accreditation criteria and monitoring the update of HEA (hereinafter: working group of the Agency). It met three times, it discussed the act amending HEA at all its sessions, they were promptly adopting views and comments for the suggestion and notified the ministry of it.

Act amending HEA

The act amending HEA brings a long-planned (expected) transition to the so-called institutional accreditation in the re-accreditation procedure (it was already included in the attempts to amend HEA from 2013 and 2014). The change means that the Agency would still do initial accreditations of study programmes (and naturally of higher education institutions), but it would no longer re-accredit them. Despite that it could still take away the accreditation from the study programme if it would find severe violations in the implementation, organization, transformation and self-evaluation of study programme, in both extraordinary evaluation procedures for higher education institutions and in extraordinary evaluations of study programmes. The re-accreditation procedure for higher education institutions could be extended because of this change as the group of experts would do two multi-day evaluation visits which would enable a more thorough assessment of the operation of institutions, but mainly of the quality assurance systems and the implementation, organization and transformation of study programmes. The act amending HEA also defines in more detail the extraordinary evaluations of higher education institutions and study programmes as well as individual stages and deadlines in accreditation procedures. More detailed conditions for the establishment and accreditation of institutions were proposed which would enable the Agency to define criteria which would be harder to challenge in appeal procedures. The Agency has been warning about this "shortcoming" of the applicable HEA the entire time. It mainly refers to conditions related with the scientific-research and artistic work of the anticipated instructors of subjects in fields for which the institution is being established and submits the proposals of study programmes, the conditions to establish a university are tougher, material conditions are specified in more detail... Institutional accreditations would enable the Agency less administrative work and a lot lower number of procedures, and they would also lessen the burden of higher education institutions.

A good novelty are the annual sample evaluations of study programmes, intended for consultations and improvement of quality assurance systems which enable constant monitoring of quality for the Agency (follow-up). This would enhance the advisory role of the Agency.

The amending act is supposed to enable changes in the accreditation of joint study programmes by simplifying them for institutions and taking away a fair

amount of competences of the Agency. The Agency is against this change, of which it has already informed the ministry.

The working group shall continue its work in spring 2016 in the preparation of the comprehensive systemic update of HEA as well.

Act regarding the Agency

As evident from the previous self-evaluation reports, the Agency and the Council, in addition to the transition to institutional accreditation, have been advocating the entire time for the enhancement of the independence and mainly the financial stability of its operation, advisory role and analytical activity, whereby it has the concern for the comparability of operation with other European quality assurance agencies in higher education and the compliance of operation with ESG standards and the enhancement of international and interdepartmental cooperation with stakeholders.

Based on several years of experience, the Agency has found that to achieve the abovementioned the best option would be to have a specialized act regarding the Agency, therefore, a position was adopted during this self-evaluation period that the act amending HEA should be of transitional character. Simultaneously with the creation of a systemic HEA the Agency shall prepare a proposal of a specialized act regarding the Agency which shall comprehensively regulate the area of its operation. The act regarding the Agency should define more clearly its financial, organizational and legal regulation. It should take into consideration the new ESG standards adopted in May 2015, the relationship towards HEA and the Research and Development Activity Act (RDAA) and include in them the criteria regarding quality which arise from these two acts. The act regarding the Agency should also determine the assurance of progress as an aspect of quality and the procedures of constant monitoring of quality (follow-up). A more thorough change of accreditation and evaluation procedures would be worth a consideration. Not only is the transition towards institutional accreditation important, but also the regulation of the initial accreditation, as under the applicable rule some conditions need to be met that can only be developed by the institution in a year or several years after it. The Director of the Agency presented the initiative for a specialized act regarding the Agency to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports (MESS), the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Slovenia as well as the SSU and the representative unions. The initiative was met with positive responses.

Slovenian Qualifications Framework Act

The representatives of the Agency attended the meeting of the Committee for Education, Sports and Youth for the discussion of the proposal of the Slovenian Qualifications Framework Act (SQFA). They actively participated at its presentation in November 2015. It was published in the Official Gazette of the

Republic of Slovenia No. 104/2015, it entered into force on 12 January 2016 and will be applied from 12 July 2016.

Accreditation criteria

Even though a contextual update of accreditation criteria is one of the assignments in the action plan, the working group has not yet started its work. The reason for it is again in the amending of HEA which was announced by MESS in the spring; significant changes were anticipated in the field of accreditations. The Agency has decided that it shall change the accreditation criteria and the evaluation criteria (for higher vocational colleges) after the implementation of the act amending HEA. In addition, it will have to take into consideration the new ESG standards, adopted in May 2015.

Training of candidates for entry into the register of experts

The committee for the review of applications of candidates for entry into the register of experts met once, in September. It found that 54 candidates responded to the public call. 5 sent incomplete applications and were asked to complete them, while 8 failed to meet the conditions for entry into register of experts and the committee subsequently denied their applications. The Council invited 39 candidates to the training.

The first part of the training in November was attended by 33 candidates. There is still a lack of candidates from deficit fields in the registry, which is why the Council decided to again publish a public call for candidates for entry into the register of experts according to the list of deficit fields in the register of experts.

In fall 2015, the programme of the Agency for the training of experts was again slightly modified. According to the findings from the previous self-evaluation period and the responses of candidates it was supplemented with additional contents (presentation of new ESG standards and the comparison with the criteria of the Agency Council), detailed presentations about the organization, management and operation in a group of experts, communication among the members of the groups, outside communication and writing reports. More emphasis was given to the preparation and implementation of a practical assignment, cooperation in groups, exchange of final findings and the recognition of opportunities for improvement. The training programme for the entry into the register was made shorter by a day (from three days to two), but the training was more goal-oriented and more intensive as in the previous period.

In April 2015, the Agency also participated in the training of candidates-students, organized by SSU. This training is a requirement for further training at the Agency. It would be necessary to obtain experts from various fields so that all fields according to ISCED are filled in the register, but this must be done by SSU.

Treatment of application forms for the new information system of the Agency (eNakvis)

The activities regarding the information system of the Agency, eNakvis, have continued. The system is being established through the infrastructure of the ministry of public administration which shall enable an efficient exchange of data among all stakeholders and eliminate the multiple entry of identical data.

Simultaneously with the activities connected with the information system, the Agency attempted a thorough change of the application form *proposal for accreditation*. Instead of a uniform form which is complicated and somewhat non-transparent – the questions repeat themselves, there is no clear line between institutional accreditation and accreditation of study programmes or between initial accreditation and re-accreditation –, it prepared special forms for each type of accreditation. They are adjusted to the specialties of individual procedures, they are prepared according to the areas of assessment from the accreditation criteria, the questions are more concrete and related with the criteria, required are only their data, necessary to meet the criteria. The forms also include clear instructions on how to fill them out which contributes to a better understanding and interpretation of the criteria.

At the November meeting the Council discussed the proposals of new application forms for the initial accreditation of a higher education institution and a study programme. It consented that the application forms be imported to the test information environment of the new information system. In January 2016, it discussed and confirmed the proposals of new application forms for re-accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes. These shall also be imported to the test environment.

Work in projects, cooperation with stakeholders

On 22 and 23 May 2015, the Agency hosted the representatives of agencies, CEENQA members, in Ljubljana. It was attended by 46 representatives from 21 countries. The first day of the meeting was intended mainly to the presentations of the findings of research and the projects regarding the influence of external quality assurance systems and accreditations on higher education and the workshops on this topic. On the second day the CEENQA general assembly was held, at which the Director was once again appointed as the vice-president of this association.

On 13 November 2015 the Agency organized a consultation marking the 5th anniversary of its operation, intended for all higher and higher vocational education stakeholders. In attendance were also the minister Maja Makovec Brenčič, PhD, and EQAR director Colin Tück. The central topic of the consultation was a reflection on the five-year operation of the Agency and an exploration of

the future (the role of the Agency and the challenges for external monitoring and improvement of quality). The EQAR director concluded the topic with a contribution about the European view on quality assurance in higher education. The responses from the attendants of the consultation were positive, a wish was expressed for the Agency to organize more of such consultations and exchanges of opinions among the stakeholders.

A lot of time was given to the work in the European project Erasmus+ EIQAS (titled: Improvement of internal quality assurance systems). Along with partners from four countries we organized three five-day trainings (the first for the agencies; the second for students-experts; the third for experts) and numerous documents were prepared (guide for internal quality assurance, national and international (country in cross-country) reports regarding the analysis of survey questionnaires, examples of good practices in connection with updated ESG standards, framework for the training of the experts of agencies, comparative analysis of the methods of external quality assessment with internal quality assurance systems). The project shall conclude in August 2016.

In December 2015, a training and workshops were organized in Ljubljana for students of the partner countries of the project. Students (experts) from Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia were acquainted at the lectures with the changed ESG, with various practices and issues in the establishment of internal quality assurance systems, history of the development of quality assurance systems and discussed the peculiarities of the implementation of standards in different countries. During the five-day meeting the participants exchanged views on good practices, challenges and opportunities for improvement in different environments and discussed from different aspects every standard in Part 1 of ESG standards. We also did a (simulated) visit to higher education institutions.

The result of the training was a guide about ESG standards for students (Students' Guide); it is a students' view on the implementation of ESG standards into internal quality assurance systems at institutions / colleges. At the same time, it aims to present key concepts of assessment, examples of good practices and challenges which are faced by students-experts in the evaluations of internal quality assurance systems. The guide emphasizes that the internal quality assurance system is a set of tools and mechanisms which are used by the institutions / colleges for help in the monitoring, assessment and improvement of quality and the preparation of action plans.

Within the EIQAS project we also prepared a comparative analysis of the methods of external assessment of internal quality assurance systems titled Comparative Analysis of the QA Agencies' Methodologies for the Assessment of IQA, which has not yet received a final confirmation. We compared regulative regulations, procedural practices, methodological approaches in the evaluation and making of decisions regarding accreditations, indicators of quality for external assessment of internal quality assurance systems, procedures of continuous monitoring of quality, regulation of systemic analyses, good practices

and challenges for four of the participating quality assurance agencies from Slovenia, Portugal, Poland and Bulgaria. The analysis does not only compare the similarities and differences about how agencies assess internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions, but also contains a broader comparison of the work and organization of the agencies reaching to all areas of external quality assurance.

In international working groups the staff continued their active work mainly on the following projects:

- **EEEP (ECA's Expert Exchange Platform):** activities for the establishment of the platform continued, despite the efforts of the working group an exchange of experts among agencies has not yet been established. The reason is a too low number of included and active members of the ECA association ECA.
- **CeQuInt** (Certificate for Quality of Internationalisation): at the beginning of 2015 there was a dissemination conference in Paris at which the certification for quality of internationalisation was awarded to the colleges which met the internationalisation quality standards. Among those who received the certificate was the International Business programme of the Faculty of Economics of the University of Ljubljana, where the Agency was actively involved.

The Agency organized for the staff:

- a workshop and additional lectures by an external expert from the ministry competent for public administration regarding the General Administrative Procedure Act;
- a refreshment course on ethics, integrity and conflict of interest which was carried out by the representatives of the Corruption Prevention Commission. They commended the Agency's risk register.

The staff could intensively participate in both, they prepared questions in advance which were related with the issues they face in their work.

Audit by the Court of Audit of the Republic of Slovenia (Court of Audit)

Discussion of the draft and proposal of the audit report by the Court of Audit "Procedures of evaluation, accreditation and granting concessions in higher and higher vocational education" dated 10 November 2015

The priority of the Agency in November and December 2015 was the preparation of extensive explanations containing the reasons to contest the audit findings in the draft of the audit report by the Court of Audit regarding the procedures of evaluation and accreditation; the preparation for the clarification meeting which was called for by the Court of Audit on 3 December 2015, and the preparation of an objection against the proposal of the audit report.

In the proposal of the audit report it is indicated that the procedures of granting evaluation, accreditations and concessions (the latter is not a part of the Agency's competences) in the period from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2013 were not efficient and that it is not possible to find if and how they contributed the adequate quality and diversity of study programmes. The Agency was surprised about the content of the audit. According to its opinion the Court of Audit exceeds its powers as it is not auditing the operation of the Agency the second time around but rather the entire structure of the quality assurance system, for which it does not have explicit and professional competences. Upon the initiation of the audit, the Agency appealed against its decisions, but the senate of the Court of Audit denied its appeal.

The proposal of the audit report is extensive, and it contains numerous corrective actions for the Agency proposed by the Court of Audit, of which many refer to a more detailed determination of the criteria for quality assurance and a more detailed determination of measurable indicators of quality ("the criteria do not contain indicators or indications of, for example, minimal values, numbers, extent of relationships with which it would be possible to confirm the compliance with individual criteria").

In the reasons to contest the audit findings, at the clarification meeting and in the objection against the proposal of the audit report, the Agency emphasized that the Court of Audit failed to consider the essential characteristics of the external quality assurance system. Therefore, it must again warn about the characteristics and meaning of this system in the European higher education area in relation with the ESG standards. The operation in compliance with these standards is the requirement for the recognition of the Agency in the joint European higher education area (membership in ENQA, entry to EQAR) and the international recognition of the Slovenian higher education and higher vocation diplomas; thus, fulfilling the main purpose for which the Agency was established.

An internationally recognized agency must continue to operate in accordance with ESG, but at the same time, in addition to the provisions of HEA, Post-Secondary Vocational Education Act, GAPA and other regulation, it must consider the extreme complexity and diversity of institutions / colleges as well as study programmes, their autonomy of education guaranteed to them by law and the constitution, therefore some of the corrective measures, indicated in the proposal of the audit report, cannot be implemented in the manner suggested by the Court of Audit.

The Agency has explained to the Court of Audit in great detail that because of the complexity of institutions / colleges and study programmes and also by taking into consideration Part 1 of ESG that it is impossible to accurately define individual criteria with an accurate value and the contextual definition of indicators and the minimal standards within an individual criterium, based on which it will be able without a doubt and uniformly assess its compliance and the conditions for granting accreditation. Quality assessment does not only (or mainly) refer to the measurability of individual indicators and its (non-

)compliance, it is also impossible to determine in advance a relationship according to which it would be possible to grant an accreditation for a full or a shorter period or to deny it.

On the other hand, the Agency agreed with some of the findings by the Court of Audit, namely: a clear setting of competences between individual bodies, elimination of the duplication of procedures, for example meeting the requirements for entry into the register of institutions / colleges under the jurisdiction of MESS or meeting the requirement for accreditation of institutions and external evaluation of colleges. It shall improve and change its operation where possible and in a manner which shall not endanger its mission; this mainly refers to the regulation of (the duration) procedure, change of criteria, improvement of decision-making, a more detailed regulation of the conditions for appointment of experts and the renting of the premises of the Agency. It also finds that for the achievement of many assignment it is necessary to make relevant amendments to HEA or adopt a special act regarding the Agency.

2.3 FINDINGS OF THE SELF-EVALUATION

This sub-chapter is divided into self-evaluation findings regarding the work of the Agency which were recognized in this period as opportunities for improvement by taking into consideration the findings of the Court of Audit, and the presentation of the findings from the survey.

The findings are therefore partially presented below, and partially in chapter 3, Compliance of the operation of the Agency with ESG standards.

2.3.1 Findings regarding the work of the Agency

We find that the Agency paid a lot of attention to transparency, objectivity and impartiality in accreditation procedures in this self-evaluation period. Of course, it has a lot of work in this area – also by taking into consideration the findings of the Court of Audit about the evaluation and accreditation procedures –, but we can still find that the Council:

- more consistently compared its decisions regarding accreditations with previous decisions and comparable circumstances, whereby it took a stance regarding each inconsistency; explanations especially for negative decisions and for re-accreditations for a shorter period were contextually better justified;
- before deciding at the meetings wrote its opinions in the reports about the applications in the procedures which made decision-making and writing decision easier;
- strove for a more consistent exercising of the rights of institutions / colleges in the stating of opinions regarding all the findings (proof) and for the experts to always state their opinions about the responses of

institutions / colleges and based on that prepared clear and unambiguous final reports.

While there were positive actions of the Council (multiple requests to supplement the application, also after the completed visit to the institution / college and the final report by the experts, as defined by HEA) caused a significant extension and intentional stalling of procedures if the institutions / colleges have not (yet) complied with all the criteria. The latter needs to be avoided which is trying to be regulated by the act amending HEA by determining a final deadline for final supplements and a type of oral hearing on the last day of the evaluation visit. It is a partially different arrangement as defined by GAPAA.

The Agency strived to establish a continuous (prompt) monitoring (so-called follow-up) of the improvement and development of the quality of institutions / colleges, and the Council required from the institutions to prepare action plans. The action was good but did not come to fruition in practice mostly because additional work was needed on further procedures regarding the monitoring of the achieving of assignments and the lack of a basis in the regulation. The Council recently abandoned this practice.

Despite the causes for abandonment of action plans indicated above, we believe that the main reasons also lie in the fact that the Agency failed to clearly present to the institutions the importance and meaning of these action plans and that it did not consistently require them in all procedures.

We see a lot of opportunities for improvement in the writing of reports by experts. We also agree with the Court of Audit in this matter. Even though the Agency has in the past prepared uniform forms for the writing of reports for every type of accreditation and evaluation along with instructions, there are still plenty of shortcomings in the reports which need to be eliminated urgently. Firstly, greater comparability of reports needs to be achieved which required additional training of experts on the one hand and of the Agency (mainly of the technical members of staff conducting accreditation and evaluation procedures) on the other. Further, we need to achieve more clarity, accuracy, unambiguity and objectivity of reports because we find that in many cases:

- the reports for re-accreditation of study programmes are usually directed much too institutionally;
- that experts because of potential unpleasant consequences in administrative procedures avoid finding inconsistencies or make them seem milder by defining them as opportunities for improvement;
- that sometimes experts do not study accreditation and evaluation reports created based on previous assessment but should have done it to determine the development and progress of the institution;
- that recommendations for the improvement of quality are not thought through and are very general, often they are only paraphrases of Slovenian and European regulation, whereby the experts do not take enough consideration of the special circumstances of the institution / colleges and the type, cycle and character of study programmes. Not

enough of them are connected with the actual improvement of quality, for example in the sense of pedagogical and research excellency, they only occasionally impose additional work on the institutions.

There are several reasons for such a situation, among them:

- despite the changes, the criteria for accreditation and evaluation are still not specific enough and too much criteria require mainly the administration and collection of data, there are not enough criteria which could be the basis for the actual assessment of quality, non-transparent unified application form and the fact that because of the anticipated amendments to HEA which would be the basis for the new criteria, the Agency has not prepared an interpretation of the criteria;
- technical members of the staff do not give enough of a unified advice to the expert and monitor their work or the experts do not take them into consideration;
- that the Agency despite an increasingly bigger effort still is not consistent enough in the monitoring of its own practice in the decision-making;
- that the Agency did not publish the reports of the groups of experts from the beginning and that it started publishing the decisions of the Council only in this self-evaluation period.

To improve this situation the Agency will need to, in addition to improving regulation, application forms and instruction for experts, plan more carefully the consultations for experts and organize special workshops intended for this issue. The meetings at the Agency will also have to be better prepared as the joint resolution of contextual issues only started. The unification of work at the Agency – of the technical members of the staff and the Agency Council – in terms of the explanation of the criteria, indicators of quality, recognition of correct handling by taking into consideration the peculiarities of procedures and the types of institutions / colleges..., nonetheless, also the recognition of a clear division of competence of the involved parties, shall help to resolve several recognized issues.

2.3.2 Findings from surveys

In this self-evaluation period we also surveyed the experts of the Agency and institutions / colleges (they are surveyed every two years) in addition to the staff and the members of the Council who are surveyed every year. Even though the survey questionnaires were changed, the findings can mainly still be compared with those obtained in previous self-evaluation periods, as the content, except for more detailed questions about the self-evaluation of the Agency and risk factors, has not been changed significantly.

Council

The findings of the survey analysis show in comparison with the previous year positive trends in all content blocks of questions, even those referring to the assessment of the work and participation with employees and the general satisfaction of the members of the Council.

The average rating of all responses in 2015 is higher than in previous years (in 2013 the rating was 3.8; in 2014 it was 4.0) and is 4.1.

Out of all content blocks, the Council gave the highest rating to the work and cooperation with the staff, the relationships at the Agency, general satisfaction (rating 4.3; deviation 0.81) and the meetings of the Council (rating 4.3; deviation 1.12).

In the average ratings of all the sets a positive trend can be observed compared to previous years. The lowest rated content block is the satisfaction with the reports by groups of experts and the cooperation with them. If we examine the data more closely, this rating is low, because the Council believes that there are not enough experts from all the fields in the Agency's register of experts (rating 2.5). A similar comment can be found in the responses of the staff who believe that the Agency should have more competent experts from Slovenia and abroad.

The members of the Council highlight among the most common issues in their work the publication of individual documents and matters right before a meeting which does give them enough time for a comprehensive overview of the documentation or the decision-making can be risky, or it can be postponed until the next meeting. The members of the Council additionally wish to have an analysis of the adopted decisions.

Staff

The findings of the survey analysis among the staff show positive trends in all content blocks of questions compared to previous years, also of those sets which were rated lower in 2014 than in 2013. The average rating of all responses in 2015 was higher than in the previous years (in 2013, the rating was 3.5; in 2014 it was 3.3) and is 3.8.

The staff gave the highest rating among all content blocks to satisfaction at work and cooperation (rating 4.1; deviation 0.83).

In the average ratings of all sets a positive trend compared to previous years can be observed. The lowest rating, but still above average, was given to the staff's rating of the cooperation with the Council (rating 3.2; deviation 0.92). It is evident from their responses that they wish a uniform representation of the Agency, to which a more active inclusion of the members of the Council into international activities and the activities which are not solely connected with the

discussion of the topics at the meeting of the Council. The proposals of the staff for the calibration of work refer to both the staff and the members of the Council.

Compared to the previous year, the rating of the satisfaction with work and the cooperation among the staff has risen the most. They suggest more refreshment courses (also regarding GAPA), enabling their professional growth.

Among the most common issues in their work they indicate the use of GAPA in accreditation procedures, the differences in the handling of the technical members of the staff, a poor responsiveness of some experts and their tardiness in submitting the report.

The staff wish for the action plan to in the future be structured according to priorities, adopted sooner and written in a joint document along with a report on the work and the annual work plan. They suggest more meetings and more regular work meetings, more calibration of the work of the technical members of the staff, prompt monitoring of work and burdens, and the fulfilment of the conclusions of the Council and the agreements at joint meetings, they the information system be established as soon as possible.

The staff believe that with an equal employment status the general atmosphere at the Agency has improved.

Experts

The findings of the analysis among the experts, compared to 2013 when they were last surveyed, show slightly negative trends. The average rating of all the responses in 2015 is lower than in 2013 (when the rating was 4.6) and is 4.0.

From all content blocks, the experts gave the highest rating to the satisfaction with assessment, reports and cooperation (rating 4.4; deviation 0.93). The highest rating was received by technical members of the staff, their willingness to answer questions and explain and help (4.6). The lowest rating, but still above average, was received by the content block regarding the organization and management of the Agency (rating 3.4; deviation 1.16), whereby the average rating regarding adequate informedness about the activities of the Agency and an adequate flow of information was 3.0.

From the contextual responses of experts, it is evident that the professionalism of the technical members of the staff is at a high level, but that there are big differences among them regarding the way of work and the interpretation of documents and regulations.

The experts recommend that an electronic form of the submitted documentation be determined in detail, the criteria for the denial of an application be determined, the structure of the evaluation report improved, the deadline for the submission of the evaluation report improved, the same expert enabled to participate in more procedures, increase the selection of foreign experts and students-experts. Recommendations referring to the content of the assessments are aimed more at systemic solutions which would enable the beginning of the implementation of the study programmes without an accreditation; external evaluation shall be done after the enrolment of the students which would enable focus on the essential elements of quality assurance, such as scientific work, transfer of knowledge into the environment, quality of pedagogical work, organization of annual consultations with colleges and the implementation of coincidental visits at higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges.

Among the most common issues in their work, the experts specify the use of GAPA in procedures which imposes on them an unpredictable extent of work in connection with the supplementation of the application. In addition, they detect differences in the frequency of appointing experts in more procedures and suggest more expert-students. They warn that in the assessment they have available incomplete data or data which do not offer answers to their questions, some applicants deliberately hide the inconsistencies. They highlighted that the cooperation of some members of the group does not have enough quality and is not thorough enough, mainly in the phase of the preparation for the visit (reading documents).

The experts wish to receive information about the conclusion and outcome of the procedure in which they took part. In addition, they suggest more notifying about the events, which are important for them, documents, changes, projects, acquainting with the work programme of the Agency... It is also evident from the responses that they miss more consultations for the discussion of professional topics.

Stakeholders

The findings of the analysis of surveys of the external stakeholders, compared to 2013 when they were last surveyed, show positive trends in three out of four content blocks. The average rating of all responses in 2015 is lower than in 2013 (3.6) and is 3.5.

Out of all content blocks, external stakeholders gave the highest rating to the work of the staff at the Agency, notifying and general satisfaction (rating 3.8; deviation 1.12). Here, the highest rating was given to the organization of the visit and successful achievement of assignments and obligations, determined in the visit protocol (4.0).

The lowest rating, but still above average, was given to the content block about the self-evaluation report of the Agency and the planned activities for improvement (rating 3.0; deviation 1.29), but they explained that they know it poorly or not at all.

The contextual answers of the external stakeholders it is evident that there are big differences among the technical members of the staff and that they do not have the same views in individual procedures.

External stakeholders suggest shortening the procedures and simplifying re-accreditation procedures, better notifying of institutions / colleges about the activities of the Agency, better responsiveness of the Agency, unification of the management of procedures, joining the accreditation of more study programmes into one procedure, better coordination of the schedule of the visit, faster responsiveness of the Agency after the submission of the application.

Among the most common issues indicated is the fact that they must submit a lot of documentation on the day of the visit which is very hard to prepare in a short time. Further, they state that specifics of different types and cycles of the study are not taken into consideration enough, mainly in higher education professional study programmes and part-time study. They detected various levels of strictness of assessment and unfamiliarity with the specifics and the direction of individual members of universities, institutions or colleges. Similar as experts, external stakeholders see opportunities in the focus on key elements of quality in the assessment.

In the filling out of the documentation, external evaluators have been having issues with the electronic application form and sending large quantities of files which must also be submitted as hard copy. They suggest that the documentation sent electronically be acknowledged more.

External stakeholders miss a larger number of experts from abroad, and they believe that the decisions of the Council are too extensive.

Opportunities for improvement:

Regarding the contextual answers and recommendations of respondents we find that opportunities for improvement need to be sought at various areas which include internal as well as external stakeholders in the operation of the Agency. The most important are:

- implementation of the eNakvis information system with the use of new forms, coordinated with various stakeholders,*
- continuation of the preparation of the specialized act regarding the Agency, ensuring faster responsiveness of the Agency after the receipt of the application and limitation of the supplementations of applications*

in certain cases (for example, after the oral hearing or a decision of the Council...),

- by taking into consideration the specifics of individual procedures, institutions, study programmes and their implementation continuing to calibrate the work of employees, regular work meetings and instructions for work,*
- increasing the number of experts, entered into the register, mainly experts from different foreign countries and experts-students,*
- in addition to continuing annual consultations for experts also thematic consultations and workshops,*
- to continue notifying stakeholders about important events, trainings, achievements and tenders of the Agency, acquainting all the stakeholders with the self-evaluation report of the Agency,*
- timely preparation of the materials of quality for the meeting of the of the Agency Council, especially in the event of negative decisions,*
- to adopt an action plan and determine priorities as soon as possible,*
- to carry out in 2016 a professional education seminar following a proposal of the employees and training for experts of institutions / colleges.*

Risk factors

This year the self-evaluation questionnaire for the first time includes a chapter on risk factors (conflict of interests, attempts to influence...), as we wanted to check whether and how often the staff, the members of the Council and experts detect them in their work and if they know how to appropriately respond to them in actual situations.

Staff

Out of 20 employees at the Agency, the survey was filled out by 12 employees, and the chapter about risk factors was filled out by eleven employees.

The findings of the survey have shown that all the staff understand the meaning of the institution of obligatory avoidance of conflicts of interest. In doing their work (conducting procedures) 44.4% of the employees in the previous year detected an actual or potential conflict of interest, of which a half only once, and a half several times. The remaining 55.6% did not detect it. All employees know how they must handle when they find themselves situations with conflicts of interest. Further, to the question whether stakeholders tried to influence their work in the previous year (for example, by urging, convincing, offering various benefits, event threats), 70% of employees gave a negative response, and 30% responded positively. From the latter, 50% responded that it only happened once, while 50% responded that it had happened several times. But it is possible to understand from the responses that informs or educate of the staff on how to handle such situations is very good, because they all gave a positive response to this question.

From the responses of the staff regarding limitations about accepting gifts it is evident that their acquaintance with it is 100%. Among those who received a gift in connection with performing their job is 9% of the staff, 91% did not receive it.

Opportunities for improvement:

From the obtained answers it is possible to conclude that the staff understand the meaning and know the characteristics of potential risk factors and they know how to handle them correctly when these factors appear. This was most likely contributed by the concern of the management for the regular achievement of actions which are in the register of the risks of the Agency and a general wish and willingness of the staff to upgrade their knowledge about ethics and integrity at work (of civil servants). Because almost a half of the employees met with at least one risk factor in the previous year, raising awareness needs to be continued (seminars, warning the staff about the new potential forms of risk factors) and to continue to encourage them with the help of good practices towards impartial and potential operation.

Council

Out of a total of eleven members, who are part of the Council, the self-evaluation questionnaire, including the chapter on risk factors, was filled out by six members of the Council.

Their response to the question whether they understand the meaning of the obligatory avoidance of conflicts of interest was fully positive. In the previous year, an actual or potential conflict of interest in performing their work (decision-making in accreditation and evaluation procedures) was detected a couple of

times by 16.7% members of the Council, while 83.3% did not have issues with that. The members of the Council provided a fully positive response to the question whether they know how to handle a situation where they find themselves in a conflict of interests; they chose among various answers which were provided to them regarding the question.

About the attempts of stakeholders to influence the work of the members of the Council (for example by urging, convincing, offering different benefits, even threatening) 83.3% members of the Council responded that they did not have such issues in the previous year, while the remaining 16.7% experienced attempts by stakeholders to influence them. The members of the Council responded positively in full to the question whether they know how to handle such situations, but they chose different answers among the provided ones. 66.7% members of the Council responded that they do not give in to the pressure and they do their job professionally, while 33.3% percent responded that they inform the president of the Council, the Director of the Agency, members of the Council and open a discussion about the topic and they do not succumb to the pressure and do their job professionally.

Opportunities for improvement:

Even though it is evident from the findings of the survey that the members of the Council are well informed about the meaning of individual risk factors and occasionally also detect them in their work, the responses about the method of handling the situation in the future when these factors appear, are quite "dispersed". It would make sense to organize a seminar or a training for the members of the Council in the future, which would be led by experts from the field of ethics and integrity, where members of the Council would have the opportunity to refresh and further their knowledge and get answers about the most appropriate handling of actual situations.

Experts

Out of 200 experts in the register of experts of the Agency, the self-evaluation questionnaire for 2015, including the chapter on risk factors, was filled out by 31 experts. But it must be taken into consideration that 130 experts actively participate in accreditation procedures.

The responses of experts to the question whether they understand the meaning of obligatory avoidance of conflict of interest were mainly positive (93.3%), 6.7% answered that they do not know this institution.

In doing their work (assessments in accreditation and external evaluation procedures) an actual or potential conflict of interest was detected by 12.9% of experts, half of which only once, and the other half several times. 87.1% of experts had no issues with it. To the question of whether they know how to handle if a conflict of interest occurs, a positive response was given by 76.7% experts, and 23.3% indicated that they do not know that. The responses of those

who said that they know how to handle such situations, were different, the majority write that they inform the technical member of the staff or the management of the Agency about it, or they eliminate themselves from the group of experts / the assessment.

Regarding the attempts of stakeholders to influence the work of the experts, for example by urging, convincing, offering various benefits, even threats, only 9.7% of experts had issues with it, while 90.3% indicated that they did not have such issues. But they are mostly informed about the method of correct handling in cases of attempts to be influenced, as 86.7% responded positively to this question, while 13.3% does not know it. The descriptions of actual handling of experts in such cases are varied.

Opportunities for improvement:

It is evident from the findings of the survey that the informedness of the experts with the meaning and characteristics of risk factors is not a hundred percent, and their handling in actual situations between them is slightly different. The Agency shall therefore prepare informative materials for the experts which shall help them recognize the main characteristics of potential risk factors and their prevention. The materials shall be sent to all experts to the e-mail addresses. We shall be notifying the candidates for new experts of the Agency in the obligatory training in more detail.

A more detailed analysis of all the surveys is in the appendix.

3. COMPLIANCE OF THE OPERATION OF THE AGENCY WITH ESG STANDARDS

The comparison of the compliance of the operation of the Agency with ESG standards has been done according to the same methodology as in previous SER (for 2013 and 2014), so we are following the findings of the international group of evaluators according to the ESG standards, written in the evaluation report upon the admission to the ENQA association on 6 March 2015 (ENQA report), and we are adding the self-evaluation findings. The difference is that we shall not indicate all the standards, but only those where the group of ENQA evaluators did not determine full compliance of the Agency with them. It is seven standards, for six standards (standards: 2.3, 2.5, 2.6, 3.1, 3.5 and 3.7) the group found substantial compliance, for one (standard: 3.4) it found partial compliance. In addition, these are standards which were applicable until the update in May 2015, but it is possible to compare them contextually with the new ESG.

Before discussing individual standards, we summarize the most important positive findings of ENQA evaluators and their recommendations for the improvement of the work. Among the advantages are mainly:

- a recognized and established role of the Agency in the Slovenian higher education area;
- up-to-date and periodic (cyclic) assessment of higher education institutions (institutions) and study programmes as well as higher vocational colleges (colleges);
- tendencies to transition to the re-accreditation of institutions and a gradual abandonment of re-accreditations of study programmes which is currently reflected in a (too) high number of accreditation procedures and visits at institutions and therefore a too big of a burden of institutions;
- strong developmental potential of the Agency in its operation which exceeds the potential seen in other agencies in the European higher education area.

The evaluators recognized the opportunities for improvement in:

- a uniform understanding and interpretation of accreditation criteria among all the stakeholders, but at the same time they advised that the criteria should not be changed too often;
- the change of the procedures of constant and further monitoring of quality at institutions by abandoning procedures for re-accreditation of study programmes which shall be reflected in the preparation of suitable mechanisms for monitoring quality (follow-up); and
- the regulation of the financing of the Agency from the national budget.

3.1 ESG STANDARDS WHERE THE OPERATION OF THE AGENCY WAS FOUND TO BE SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLIANT

ESG standard 2.3: CRITERIA FOR DECISIONS

Findings of the international group of evaluators:

The group finds that all criteria of the Agency are publicly available and published at its website. Groups of experts use for the assessments and writing joint and evaluation reports standardized forms (templates for writing reports) and the instructions to fill them out, prepared in accordance with areas of assessment according to the criteria. The Agency Council adopts all decisions regarding accreditation and external evaluations based on published criteria for accreditation and external evaluation (criteria). Before adopting the final decision, the applicants have the possibility to make comments to reports by groups of experts.

The Agency has several actions at its disposal to ensure consistency in decision-making procedures. These are:

- training of experts (training candidates for entry into the register of experts, consultations of experts), members of the Council and the staff;
- Quality Manual;
- manual for experts, precisely defining their work, and the use and explanation of the criteria;
- cooperation of technical members of staff with experts and their help during the visits of institutions / colleges;
- well-functioning appeal system;
- carrying out surveys to measure the satisfaction of stakeholders and provide information about the quality of its operation and services as a whole (also about the work of the technical members of the staff and the groups of experts). This provides a concluded circle of quality. The purpose of such a method of obtaining information is to continuously improve the tools for accreditation and evaluation.

The group recognizes several of the measures used to provide a consistent explanation of the criteria, but a considerable number of their changes hinders a consistent interpretation. It finds that the Agency has put a lot of effort in the last couple of years into the provision of objective and transparent decision-making procedures. A move into a positive direction in this field is shown by the introduction of various mechanisms, for example a changed and more goal-oriented system of training candidates for entry into the register of experts, their consultations and a published metanalysis. Various analyses of reports and decisions of the Agency Council may also be used as a tool for a more comprehensive understanding of various roles and responsibilities among the staff, members of the Council and the experts of the Agency.

ENQA recommendation:

The Agency should enhance its efforts to make the understanding of the criteria firmer and develop and publish its interpretation.

Findings of the self-evaluation:

The recommendations from SER 2014 that absolute priority in the next self-evaluation period is given to the further activities for prompt testing, coordination with stakeholders and implementation of eNakvis were not realized fully. New application forms for accreditation and evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes, which include the interpretation of the criteria in the form of instructions to fill out the form were prepared and confirmed. The new forms shall be part of the information system, and the instructions for the interpretation of individual areas of assessment are their integral part. This ensures the stakeholders a transparent and clear explanation for the filling out of accreditation and external evaluation forms. The information system is currently not fully implemented, therefore the instructions for the interpretation of the individual areas of assessment are not available for all stakeholders, but they are available to some who participate in the testing of eNakvis and the new application forms.

However, we do warn that new application forms need to be coordinated with the act amending HEA and the new criteria, created at its basis and based on the new ESG standards. Unfortunately, this does not depend only on the Agency, but mainly from the (non-)adoption of the amending act.

Opportunities for improvement:

Final implementation of eNakvis and the changes accreditation and external evaluation forms with accompanying instructions as soon as possible.

ESG standard 2.5: REPORTING**Findings of the international group of evaluators:**

The group finds that the Agency in accordance with the provisions of article 51.f of HEA published (at its website) its decisions and the reports by the groups of experts about accreditations and external evaluation, except negative decisions about the initial accreditation of institutions and study programmes and the related reports. To ensure appropriate comparability and consistency of reports, the experts can help themselves with various documents: help for preparation, organization and implementation of assessments (Manual for the Experts), templates for writing reports and the instructions to fill them out. For every area of assessment, the experts need to prepare an applicable analysis of the situation and emphasize and justify the advantage, opportunities for improvement and potential inconsistencies. The templates for writing reports also include room for broader analyses of the advantages and opportunities for improvement.

To emphasize and retain the external part and the impartiality of the assessment procedure, the employees at the Agency, competent for conducting procedures, do not write reports by the groups of experts.

The group of evaluators finds that it is not entirely clear how the improvement of internal quality assurance systems at institutions / colleges is encouraged. Whether these are the defined advantages, opportunities for improvement and inconsistencies and the entire operation of the Agency which leads and encourages dialogue with stakeholders. It found from the discussions that the ministry competent for higher education as well as other stakeholders want more of similar information and analyses of situations which would be prepared by the Agency.

Even though it could, on the one hand, be an inconsistency with this ESG standard, because the Agency does not publish negative decisions in initial accreditation procedures, the group finds that there is not public interest for such information as the programmes shall not be implemented.

Findings of the self-evaluation:

The opportunities for improvement from the previous self-evaluation report (for 2014) were mainly directed towards the organization and implementation of regular consultations, thematic workshops and to the additional training of the experts of the Agency, for the improvement of efficiency and quality of work of the Agency and the quality of work of the experts and the Agency. Because the action plan was only adopted in the second half of 2015, the planned activities were also moved to 2016. In November 2015, the training of candidates for the entry into the register of experts was organized, and in December a five-day training of students-experts (within the EIQAS project). The result of the latter was a guide for students (Student's Guide to ESG), which represents the students' aspect, examples of good practices and advice for the assessment of the internal quality assurance systems in procedures for external quality assurance. The encouragement of the improvement of internal quality assurance systems at institutions / colleges can also be detected in the activities of the Agency, for example: participation of employees as external lecturers at various events organized by the stakeholders (training internal evaluators of quality at the University of Primorska), consultation at the fifth anniversary of the operation of the Agency (at the beginning of 2016), consultation for experts which is anticipated for April 2016.

Opportunities for improvement:

We find that there is a great wish and need of stakeholders in higher and higher vocational education for the organization of consultations and workshops regarding different topics related with the improvement of quality assurance systems, therefore the activities need to be continued (organization of events such as consultations, workshops, cooperation of the employees of the Agency at various event organized by the stakeholders in higher education, for the increase of recognition of the work of the Agency and the encouragement and

improvement of quality at institutions / colleges). It is necessary to introduce special workshops with representatives (quality assurance commissions) of the institutions / colleges and systematically continues with their implementation. This should become a permanent (annual) assignment of the Agency.

ESG standard 2.6: FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES

Findings of the international group of evaluators:

The group finds that the accreditation in every procedure is granted for a maximum of seven years. In re-accreditation procedures for institutions and study programmes and external evaluations of colleges the progress and development of internal quality assurance systems from the final accreditation and external evaluation. In re-accreditation procedures all universities were urged to attach action plans for future development and improvement to the response to the report by the group of experts.

For re-accreditation for a shorter period (up to three years) the so-called follow-up is part of the procedure. In these cases, the groups of experts assess the elimination of the found inconsistencies in accordance with the law, the criteria and the recommendations.

Generally, there are no formal tools for the follow-up of further measures to improve quality assurance system in re-accreditation procedures. The only measure pointing at the appropriateness of the follow-up procedures is the request of the Agency for the institutions to submit action plans based on the findings from external evaluations before a final decision is made regarding re-accreditation. Even though the Agency does a lot of activities which enable it to monitor the development and improvement of quality of institutions / colleges. This includes the collections and analysis of annual self-evaluation reports of institutions / colleges, numerous re-accreditation procedures of study programmes, where the fulfilment of criteria at an institutional level is also assessed.

Findings of the self-evaluation:

The recommendations of SER 2014 were mostly directed towards the enhancement of the efforts to abandon the procedures related with the re-accreditation of study programmes, and for the transition to institutional accreditation. This transition would, in addition to reducing the number of procedures, enable more comprehensive and extensive assessments on an institutional level as well as at the level of programmes; at the same time, it would guarantee enough space (and time) for a successful development and implementation of the model of continued monitoring of quality. This self-evaluation period also saw the continuation of intensive negotiations, and cooperation of the staff of the Agency and the members of the Council in the preparation of proposals of the amendments of HEA. As is already evident from SER from the previous years, the amendment to the legislation would impact the change of the legal acts of the Agency and a formal regulation of the procedures of further monitoring of quality assurance systems, which would on the one hand release the burden from the institutions of several re-accreditation procedures of study programmes, while on the other hand it would enhance the advisory role of the Agency through so-called sample evaluations and establish an efficient monitoring of quality at institutions (follow-up).

Opportunities for improvement:

We find that the situation in these areas remains practically unchanged, despite the continuous warnings by the Agency of the too high number of procedures of re-accreditation procedures for study programmes and the findings from external evaluation reports by international associations. In this self-evaluation period, the Agency very actively participated in the suggestions for the amendments to HEA, which would regulate the transition to institutional evaluation, but at the same time it would legalize more clear provisions regarding the establishment of new institutions, sample evaluation of study programmes (follow-up), more precise and transparent accreditation and evaluation procedures (also of extraordinary evaluations). Many proposals of the Agency are – opposed to the previous attempts to amend HEA – now considered in the proposal of the amending act, but the final coordination among the stakeholders are still on-going.

The efficiency and necessity of the transition to institutional evaluation, regulation of continuous monitoring (follow-up) and a precise formalization of further monitoring of quality was justified several times, and the Agency must insist on it. A prompt amendment to HEA is also necessary because of the basis for the change of the criteria in which the new ESG standards need to be considered as well. If stakeholders will not be able to agree on the amendment of HEA or if the amending act will not be adopted, the Agency must strive to adopt a specialized act regarding the Agency as soon as possible, which would comprehensively regulate all areas of its operation.

ESG standard 3.1: USE OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**Findings of the international group of evaluators:**

The group finds that the Agency despite its relatively short existence (established in 2010) is an organization, respected among stakeholders and is sometimes above the legislative regulation with its engagement. It is evident from the report that the applicable HEA is hindering a fully balanced system of the quality assurance system of the Agency which would encourage the development of internal quality assurance systems at institutions / agencies as well as the optimal execution of all the activities of an external quality assurance system (assessments). The proposal of the Agency, according to which the system would be balanced is the transition to institutional re-accreditation. This would require legislative changes.

The group of evaluators commended the Agency for its good work it performed since being established, despite the obstacles it faces because of the applicable legislation.

The operation of the Agency is fully compliant with ESG standards 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.7 and 2.8, and substantially compliant with ESG standards 2.3, 2.5 and 2.6.

Findings of the self-evaluation:

We find that the group of evaluators in some cases found substantial (and not full) compliance of the operation of the Agency with ESG standards; also due to HEA provisions. In the self-evaluation period we spent even more time as in the previous periods for the preparation of the proposal of amendments to HEA, but it is not fully coordinated with all stakeholders. If the proposed changes of legislation shall not be adopted, the Agency will not be able to adopt the appropriate measures and prepare the changes of its own legal acts which would contribute to a larger success and efficiency of its long-term operation, which will also influence internal quality assurance systems of institutions / colleges.

Opportunities for improvement:

Immediately after the adoption of the act amending HEA, the Agency must prepare and coordinate with stakeholders the new criteria in which the new ESG standards need to be taken into consideration. The criteria must precisely prescribe mainly those criteria used to assess internal quality assurance systems of institutions / colleges, continuously monitor quality (follow-up) and carry out accreditation procedures.

ESG standard 3.5: MISSION STATEMENT

Findings of the international group of evaluators:

The group finds that the mission, vision and strategic directions of the Agency are clear, public and appropriate. Key statements and strategic directions would also need to be translated into the business plan of the Agency. Room for improvement is seen in the sharing of responsibilities and the work with relevant stakeholder which would need to be better done in official documents of the Agency.

Findings of the self-evaluation:

We find that the Agency adopted all the key strategic documents, the mission, vision and strategy of development up to 2016. Many strategic objectives were achieved fully, while some need (in addition to new objectives) to be partially reformulated and more specifically specified in new strategic documents. The action plan of the Agency for 2015 anticipated the appointment of a working group for the preparation of these documents, but that was not done. Before doing that, we wanted to obtain the opinions of all stakeholders about the past work of the Agency and their proposals for improvements. We collected them at the consultation for the fifth anniversary of the operation of the Agency by doing surveys and in the interdepartmental group for the update of HEA and at various meetings.

Opportunities for improvement:

We find that a working group needs to be appointed to prepare medium-term strategic documents of the Agency and to pay special attention to:

- the development of internal quality assurance systems at institutions / colleges,*
- participation in the designing and determining the changes of legislation (amendments to HEA and a specialized act regarding the Agency), which shall be the basis for the improvement of accreditation procedures, and mainly more precise criteria of the Agency for granting accreditation on the one hand (achieving minimal standards of quality) and re-accreditation on the other (constant development and improvement by determining standards which exceed the minimum),*
- improvement of external assessments and recommendation for the improvement of the quality of institutions / colleges,*
- final adjustment of application forms and eNakvis by taking into consideration legislative changes,*
- international cooperation and transfer of good practices,*
- taking into consideration European documents from the field of quality in higher education (new ESG etc.),*
- more active cooperation with stakeholders and the experts of the Agency,*
- improving the informedness of all stakeholders,*
- improving the advisory role of the Agency (also by participating in European projects and interdepartmental and international working groups, at consultations, workshops and meetings),*
- enhancement of the recognition of the Agency.*

ESG standard 3.7: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE CRITERIA AND PROCESS USED BY THE AGENCIES

Findings of the international group of evaluators:

The Agency has all the formal and legal tools which determine its operation.

The criteria were developed in consultation with external stakeholders and are publicly available at the Agency's website. It also features an application form for accreditation and evaluation. The manual for experts has also been published and it deals with six different accreditation and evaluation procedures. Their assignments and obligations in individual procedures are slightly different, but they all have in common that the Agency appoints at least three experts (of which one student and one foreign expert) to assessment groups. The procedure begins following the proposal of the applicant (except in the event of an extraordinary evaluation). In all re-accreditation procedures and in external evaluation a visit to the institution / college is anticipated, the basis for assessment are the self-evaluation report and the filled-out application. Visits are anticipated in almost all procedures, except initial accreditations of study programmes, where they are an exception.

All decisions of the Council, the final evaluation and accreditation reports by groups of experts are published at the Agency's website, except for negative decisions (and reports by groups of experts) regarding initial accreditations.

Informal procedures of further monitoring of quality improvement have been established, and they would need to be formally defined upon the transition to institutional re-accreditation. In the current situation and legislation, for such a number of accreditations and external evaluations, the introduction of a new, formal monitoring system (follow-up) would not make sense.

ENQA recommendation:

The improvement of the integration of institutions / colleges and the creation of guidelines for the preparation of self-evaluation report and accreditation applications is recommended, which the Agency has already been planning and preparing.

Findings of the self-evaluation:

We find that the recommendation from SER 2014 and the related preparation of the guidelines for writing self-evaluation reports of institutions / colleges from the action plan of the Agency for 2015 are not fully achieved. The Agency has decided to wait for the act amending HEA to enter into force. Findings from the EIQAS project, where it participates as an equal partner, shall be helpful. One of the essential assignments of the project is the preparation of the guide for the monitoring of internal quality assurance systems in accordance with the new ESG. The insights from the abovementioned guide shall be used as the basis for the preparation of guidelines for writing self-evaluation reports, because Slovenian higher education institutions (UL and UNG) and students (experts) from four countries also participate in the partnership structure of the project), but at the same time the guide takes into consideration the opinions and comments of the so-called national advisory bodies which consist of representatives of various institutions / colleges which are not partners of the project.

Opportunities for improvement:

After the entry into force of the act amending HEA and adopting a final (coordinated) guide for the monitoring of internal quality assurance systems within the EIQAS project, a working group is appointed to prepare a proposal of the guidelines for writing self-evaluation reports of institutions / colleges. The proposal is to be presented at special workshops to their quality assurance committees and the experts of the Agency. The coordinated guidelines shall be published online.

3.2 ESG STANDARD WHERE THE OPERATION OF THE AGENCY WAS FOUND TO BE PARTIALLY COMPLIANT

ESG standard 3.4: RESOURCES

Findings of the international group of evaluators:

The group finds that there are 24 employees at the Agency, that it is situation in the centre of Ljubljana, it uses rented premises totalling 900 m², which corresponds to 30 job positions. Annual interviews between the Director and the employees are a regular practice of the Agency, he strives for their development.

Because the Agency has the status of a direct budgetary user, it makes agreements regarding its own financial sustainability directly with the ministry competent for finance, not the ministry, competent for higher education. In accordance with Article 51.m of HEA, the resource for the operation of the Agency shall be ensured from the national budget. Currently, the operation of the Agency is mainly financed from the European Social Fund (60%) and partially from the budget of the Republic of Slovenia (40%). ESF resources are anticipated until the end of August 2015, therefore all financial, human and material resources are guaranteed until then.

The group of evaluators finds that the current annual resources sufficed for its entire operation, also for the developmental and analytical activity of the Agency. It is concerned about the high percentage of financing, coming from ESF resources. If look at that from a staffing point of view, it means that 14 out of 24 employees has an employment agreement for a definite period. Even though the general commitment of MESS is to offer support to the Agency in the negotiations with the ministry of finance, the group of evaluators believes that the financial position of the Agency is endangered. It has therefore decided that the operation of the Agency is only partially compliant with this ESG standard. The solutions are on the one hand possible in ensuring the resources for the operation of the Agency from the national budget, while on the other hand a possibility was mentioned to bill accreditation and external evaluation procedures.

Considering the circumstances, the group of evaluators finds that this area needs to be solved on a national level and that it is outside of the control of the Agency.

Findings of the self-evaluation:

In this self-evaluation period, the even more intensive efforts and negotiations for the regulation of a stable financing of the Agency after the expiration of the ESF project continued. This was closely connected with the planning of staffing stability and the employment of employees for an indefinite period and the planning of assignments in the action plan for 2015.

Financial resources

In August 2015, the partial financing from the ESF project concluded whereby it was necessary to organize long-term and stable financing of the Agency. Otherwise, its operation would be made very difficult, if not even impossible, as all the costs of accreditations and external evaluations according to HEA are fully an obligation of the Agency, and a majority of the assignments, approximately two thirds, was financed from ESF resources.

The ESF resources were also used up to August 2015 to finance the salaries of 14 employees employed for a definite period and the cumulative costs for the entire operation of the Agency. After long-term negotiations with the ministry, competent for finance, the Agency was able at the end of August to ensure budgetary resources for its future operation. By the end of the ESF project, the Agency has additionally guaranteed minimal resources for operation until the end of 2015 from the current budgetary reserve. Since the Agency in 2012, 2013 and 2014 spent a little bit more resources for its operation (from 1.2 to 1.3 million Euro), as it guaranteed in the budgets for 2016 and 2017, the Director did not extend the employment agreement for four technical members of the staff. After the confirmation of the budgets, he employed the remaining 10 employees for an indefinite period on 1 October 2015.

Opportunities for improvement:

The Agency shall have to continue to strive for the resources determined in the budgets for 2016 and 2017 upon potential rebalances of the budget to not reduce. There are no reserves for potential reductions.

Human resources

In August 2015, there were 14 employees financed from ESF resources. As mentioned in previous SER, the insecurity of their employment was also slightly reflected in their working conditions and the relationships at the Agency which was evident from the surveys.

The analysis of the survey about the satisfaction of the employees at the Agency shows a positive move in this important field compared to the previous two self-evaluation periods.

Negative trends in 2014 in certain individual content blocks (about the satisfaction with work and cooperation among the staff...) were replaced by positive ones, in these and all other content blocks. If the average rating of all responses in 2013 and 2014 was 3.4, it is higher in 2015 and is 3.8. It is interesting that the staff gave the highest rating to satisfaction at work and cooperation among themselves (in 2014, the rating was barely 2.5, and in 2015 it was 4.1), which is great progress compared to previous self-evaluation periods.

We may conclude that to such great improvement, in addition to regulating the financing of the Agency and this more stable employment of the technical members of the staff, contributed many factors, among them: better informedness of the staff about the decisions of the management and about events at the Agency and outside of it, more efficient conducting of meeting and writing reports about it, calibrating work and joint resolution of issues at special meetings etc.

The staff actively cooperated more frequently at joint meetings, some prepared instructions, for example, for a unified handling in accreditation procedures, they all had the opportunity to participate in the preparation of new forms for eNakvis...

Refreshment seminars covering GAPA and ethics, integrity and the conflict of interest were organized.

Opportunities for improvement:

Even though the work atmosphere and the relationships among the staff have improved, the activities determined in the action plan need to be continued. There should be more calibration meetings prepared in advance regarding the resolution of issues the employees have in their work.

Information-communication resources

The information system (eNakvis) has been created and is working in a local server environment since August 2015, therefore it is not yet available to the public. Application forms need a thorough update; the Council confirmed them to the November 2015 meeting (initial accreditation) and the January 2016 meeting (re-accreditation). Now, the system needs to be installed to the so-called school environment in the servers of the Ministry for Public Administration (MPA) and then to the production environment. eNakvis will then be available to all users.

Since the Agency is being hosted at MPA servers, the security requirements and protocols for the implementation of the system are very demanding and long-term; the same applies for all upgrades and updates. We need to warn of the fact that the Agency shall be using the identical database as eVŠ, meaning that it will not be able to turn off or stop the entire system at any time for maintenance works. Therefore, we shall thoroughly check and test the operation of the system before the implementation. All changed application forms and operation of eNakvis regarding stakeholders shall be tested with their cooperation. We shall try and consider as much of their comments and proposals for improvement as possible.

Opportunities for improvement:

The planned measures need to be continued and to strive now more than ever for an efficient use of eNakvis in practice as soon as possible.

4. FINAL ASSESSMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

We find that there were many factors that made it difficult for the Agency to operate in compliance with the recommendations from SER 2014. The first is the insecure financing of the Agency as it was only regulated at the end of August 2015. The entire planning of its work in this self-evaluation period related to it. Other relevant factors were:

- amending HEA and the related operation (competences and assignments) of the Agency which temporarily halted the achievement of some of the assignments from the action plan;
- an extraordinary increase in the number of procedures for re-accreditation of study programmes, for 40%, which are among the most demanding and longer procedures whose integral part are evaluation visits to the institutions.

The overview of the achievement of assignments from the action plan for 2015 shows that despite a short period much has been done, some assignments have begun and will need to be continued. On the other hand, we can observe once again that it is the hardest to plan the achievement and achieve the assignments which need basis in the amended HEA. The amending of the latter was delayed into 2016, even though the competent ministry planned the adoption of the amending act for the end of 2015.

Areas of assessment from the action plan:

1. Accreditations and external evaluations

Objectives and assignments	<i>Findings of the self-evaluation</i>
Improvement of the quality of accreditation procedures and decisions	As evident from previous chapters and findings of the survey, great progress has been made in this area. The participation of the staff was consistent, active and constructive, agreed upon were joint solutions in the new application forms, instructions on how to fill them out, sending documents to stakeholders, billing the work of experts. The Council made efforts the entire time to better explain their decisions. These are permanent activities which need to be continued; in the next self-evaluation period we would give priority to: training of new members of the Council, special joint thematic meetings between the members of the Council and the employees.
Calibration of work	

2. Internal quality assurance system

Objectives and	<i>Findings of the self-evaluation</i>
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assignments	
Reorganization of work at the Agency	This area also sees progress (in everyday work, from findings of surveys). Reorganization of work shall be necessary when the Agency transitions to institutional accreditations, gets new assignments (for example sample evaluations) and establishes eNakvis.
Enhancement of the efforts for a peaceful resolution of disputes	

3. External quality assurance system

Objectives and assignments	<i>Findings of the self-evaluation</i>
Organization of regular consultations, conferences and workshops for stakeholders	<p>The action plan anticipated the consultation about the five-year anniversary of the operation of the Agency (it was organized on 13 November 2015) and workshops regarding the updated ESG standards. The latter were not yet organized for all stakeholders, while the standards were presented to candidates for experts, at SSU, individual universities at the training of internal evaluators, on 22 April 2016 they shall be discussed at the consultation of experts. In 2016, special workshops for all quality assurance commissions of institutions / colleges need to be prepared.</p> <p>In addition, the Agency organized international workshops on this topic within the EIQAS project in December 2015 (more on p. 25–30), they lasted the whole week.</p>
Guidelines for writing SER of institutions / colleges	The assignment was not achieved because we are waiting for the legislation to change.
Regulation of the operation of the Agency in a specialized act	The Agency obtained a principled consent of all stakeholders (SSU, rectors' conference, private institutions, communities of colleges) for the specialized act. MESS also did not oppose the proposal contingent on the adoption of the act amending HEA.
Carry out the training of candidates for experts	The training was carried out in November 2015 (more on p. 24–25)
Enhancement of the advisory role of the Agency	Permanent assignment which needs to be continued – also by regularly organizing various thematic consultations and workshops.

4. Criteria and other regulation

Objectives and assignments	<i>Findings of the self-evaluation</i>
Draft of the Agency strategy up to 2020	The draft was not done, it is related with the change of the legislation (more at p. 22–24).
Guidelines to improve accessibility	Approximate guidelines and identification of key areas which should contribute to the improvement of accessibility and

and flexibility of content for persons with special needs	flexibility of content for persons with special needs were prepared in cooperation with external stakeholders and experts for working with persons (youth – children, high school students) with special needs. The Agency recognizes the importance of the topic for all stakeholders in higher education, therefore it applied in the Erasmus + programme the project titled "Accessibility and Quality Assurance in European Open Education", which joins in a partnership structure organizations and associations from various countries: quality assurance agencies and their associations, higher education institutions, the Slovenian association of societies for the blind and the visually impaired, IJS... Support for the project was shown by international and European policy makers: UNESCO (Paris), EBU (European blind Union), ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education). It is planned that that the mentioned guidelines shall be extended to the area of open education and shall be coordinated with other stakeholders and umbrella organizations dealing with the issues of persons with special needs (physically impaired).
Interpretation of accreditation criteria	<p>This was partially done in the preparation of the new application forms (eNakvis), which are structured according to the criteria and where it is clear what is required for the achievement of an individual criterium. A part of the forms is also the instruction for filling out with explanations.</p> <p>The assignment shall be continued after the adoption of new criteria, the basis of which shall be in the amended legislation.</p>

5. Information system and notifying

Objectives and assignments	<i>Findings of the self-evaluation</i>
Establishment of a user-friendly information system (eNakvis)	The system has not been established yet, application forms with instruction were prepared and "imported" in the school environment. They must get a final edit as soon as possible upon taking into consideration the comments of institutions / colleges and other stakeholders.

Some key measures which need to be considered in the preparation of the action plan for 2016, are the same as for 2015; among them are:

- implementation of eNakvis (cooperation with stakeholders, special workshops, testing and improvement of new forms for various types of accreditations, introduction of electronic applications for colleges...);
- enhancement of the advisory role of the Agency and its analytical and developmental activity; direct connection of the operation of the Agency with the new ESG;
- preparation of guidelines for the self-evaluation of institutions / colleges (in cooperation with stakeholders).

New priority measures which can be efficiently realized after the adoption of the act amending HEA (now anticipated for June 2016) are:

- change of criteria and adaptation of new application forms which is also a condition for:
 - regulation of the areas of assessment (fewer criteria, more clear criteria, more clear conditions for its achievement),
 - a more precise and transparent regulation of procedures,
 - preparation of guidelines for SER of institutions / colleges;
- adoption of a new medium-term strategy of the Agency up to 2020 with more clearly defined strategic objectives as they are in the strategy 2011 to 2016.

SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • national and international recognition of the Agency (successful external evaluation and full membership in the ENQA association and entry into EQAR) • regulated long-term financing of the Agency • improvement of relationships among the staff at the Agency • publication of all legal acts, guidelines, self-evaluation reports of the Agency, decisions of the Council and final evaluation reports by the groups of experts (at the Agency's website) • active participation of the staff in the preparation of the act amending HEA • active participation of the Director and the staff in international associations and international working groups • work of the Agency in international projects (EIQAS) and application for new projects (within the framework of the Erasmus + programmes and other programmes of financing) • rational management with public resources (joining accreditation procedures) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a too high number of accreditation and external evaluation procedures (over-burdening of the technical members of the staff with the conducting of procedures, while also over-burdening applicants with the preparation of applications and the documentation, preparation for the experts' visits etc.) • insufficient informatization of the Agency (dispersed databases, transparency made difficult) • not enough experts from different fields (from certain deficit fields and students-experts) • unequal practice in the assessments of experts and the decision-making of the Council in comparable circumstances • unrealized joint thematic meetings of the Council and the staff
Opportunities for improvement	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a successful and final implementation of the eNakvis system with new application forms (for accreditation and external evaluation) and the instructions for the interpretation of the criteria • preparation of the guidelines for the writing of self-evaluation reports (active inclusion of key stakeholders in the preparation of the draft and proposal of the act) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • over-burdening with procedures (mainly re-accreditations of study programmes) limits other activities of the Agency (advisory role, systemic analyses, cooperation with stakeholders) • limitations in the establishment of an external quality assurance system (improvement of quality, enhancement of the meaning of quality) because of HEA provisions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a more active role of the staff and members of the Agency Council in interdepartmental groups and international projects • organization of regular consultations, conferences and workshops for stakeholders (internal and external), intended mainly to improve internal and external quality assurance systems and the calibration of the work of the Agency and its experts • organization of thematic meetings of the Council and the staff to improve accreditation and evaluation decisions • establishment of appropriate legal bases for a more efficient operation of the Agency, mainly the enhancement of its advisory role (adoption of the proposed amendments to HEA, individual act regarding the Agency) • establishment of a system for notifying of experts and stakeholders about important events, changes of legal acts of the Agency and the Agency's activities 	<p>and the compliance with GAPA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the assessment of quality is too quantitative, bureaucratized and does not delve enough into content which would enable further development, continuous improvement and excellency to institutions / colleges • continuous proposed amendments to HEA • reduction of recognized risk factors in the work of the employees at the Agency, members of the Agency Council and experts
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