

**REVIEW OF THE SLOVENIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY  
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (SQAA)**

**July 2013**

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## Executive Summary

This report analyses the compliance of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Part 2 and 3. It was conducted at the request of SQAA by a review panel appointed by the coordinating body, the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA).

SQAA was founded by law in March 2010 as the first independent public QA agency, and assumed some of the QA responsibilities of the Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia (CHERS) which had been operating since 2004. Evaluation and accreditation activities in Slovenian higher education date back as far as 1994.

The assessment procedure involved a self-evaluation report written by SQAA and a site visit by the review panel. The site visit in Slovenia took place during three days in April 2013 and consisted of interviews with the Agency and all relevant stakeholders, as well as a one day observation of a site visit conducted by a SQAA experts panel at a Slovenian university. This gave the review panel the opportunity to observe a SQAA procedure in practice and deepen the understanding of fulfilment of the ESG.

In the light of the evidence provided by the documentation, the interviews with the Agency and its stakeholders, and the observation of a procedure conducted by SQAA, the review panel has assessed the compliance to the ESG. The panel found that SQAA is fully compliant to 7 standards, substantially complies with 8 standards, and is partially compliant to 1 standard. Recommendations were addressed to SQAA with regard to the standards that have been found to be substantially or partially adhered to.

The review panel has found, in the self-evaluation report and in the context of the site visit, much to commend in SQAA's organisation and operations. In the past years, very elaborated and helpful tools and instruments have been built up such as the experts manual, quality manual, new accreditation criteria etc. The creation of these tools was embedded in an intensive and wide consultation process, including students and the higher education institutions. All of the stakeholders the panel interviewed commended SQAA for the fast growth in professionalism, knowledge and support.

The panel was also impressed that SQAA was able to maintain its operative capabilities in spite of management changes and the occurrence of many legal changes which asked for constant adaptations of the QA procedures. However, the review panel expresses its hope that in the near future legal changes would occur less frequently as it absorbs much energy from all SQAA staff members and has the potential to cause delays in the daily work of the agency. The panel is confident that with the new management in place the agency will find the calm and strength to further develop its qualities, to fix the gaps mentioned in this report and to implement the priorities set in the strategic plan of SQAA for the forthcoming years. There is no doubt that staff on all levels of SQAA has the qualifications and a high commitment to bring SQAA to a prime position among European quality assurance agencies.

# 1. Introduction

## *1.1 Background of the review*

This report analyses the compliance of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Part 2 and 3. It was conducted at the request of SQAA by a review panel appointed by the coordinating body, the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA). The Terms of Reference for the review were agreed between SQAA and ECA.

A strategic goal of SQAA is “the admission of SQAA to international associations (ENQA and EQAR)”. This ESG review should be seen within that context, the aim is to apply for inclusion in EQAR. Later in 2013 there are plans for an external review by an ENQA panel with the purpose of applying for full membership of ENQA.

The review panel for the external review of SQAA was composed by the Management Group of ECA and consisted of the following members:

- Dr Rolf Heusser, chair (Director National Institute for Cancer Epidemiology and Registration Switzerland, and former director of OAQ, Switzerland)
- Prof Mieczyslaw Socha, academic expert (Professor in Macroeconomics of the University of Warsaw and Vice-President of PKA, Poland)
- Ms Anca Prisacariu, student expert (doctoral candidate at the University of Bucharest, Romania and member of ESU QA Students Experts Pool)
- Dr Mark Frederiks, secretary (Coordinator international policy of NVAO, The Netherlands and Flanders).

Full CVs of the experts have been made available to SQAA.

## *1.2 The review process*

In April 2013 SQAA underwent, for the first time, an external review with the purpose of inclusion in EQAR. The assessment procedure involved a self-evaluation report written by SQAA and a site visit by the review panel.

The self-evaluation report was written by a working group consisting of three SQAA staff members. All SQAA staff members, the SQAA Council, and the SQAA management participated in the preparation of the report. The SQAA council approved the self-evaluation report on 13 March 2013. The self-evaluation report consists of an introductory chapter; a chapter describing the historical development and operations of SQAA; a chapter with information on compliance to each of the standards in ESG Part 2 and 3; and, a concluding chapter with a critical self-assessment in the light of SQAA’s strategic objectives and recommendation for improvements. These four chapters comprise 46 pages. In addition, 11 annexes were provided, including: the results of surveys

among stakeholders; a description of the tertiary education system in Slovenia; a translation of the Higher Education Act; reports on the work of SQAA; business, financial and strategic plans; the SQAA Quality Manual and Manual for Experts, and annual reports of predecessors of SQAA. Some other documents were also made available to the review panel upon request, during the site visit and in connection with the observation at the University of Maribor.

The site visit in Slovenia took place during three days in April 2013 and consisted of interviews with the Agency and all relevant stakeholders, as well as a one day observation of a site visit conducted by a SQAA experts panel at a Slovenian university. The site visit with interviews took place at the SQAA offices in Ljubljana on 22 and 24 April 2013. These meetings were held with representatives of the SQAA Council, the current Director and the former Acting Director, the professional staff of SQAA, the Ministry, higher education institutions (both public and private providers), and students. The site visit was concluded with an oral feedback to SQAA of the preliminary findings of the panel. The observation was planned as part of the JOQAR project<sup>1</sup> and it was decided to use this information for the ESG review. The observation took place on 23 April 2013 at the Faculty of Agriculture and Life Sciences of the University of Maribor. The SQAA procedure observed was an external evaluation of the study programmes of this Faculty, comprising 6 first cycle degree programmes, 3 second cycle degree programmes, and 2 third cycle degree programmes. The external evaluation of these programmes was conducted by a SQAA panel consisting of four experts, including a chair, academic expert and student from Slovenia, and a foreign expert from Croatia. The panel was supported by SQAA staff members. The entire review panel took part in the observation during one full day (the procedure lasted 2 ½ days). This gave the review panel the opportunity to observe a SQAA procedure in practice and deepen the understanding of fulfilment of the ESG. The full programme of the site visit, including the observation, is attached to this report as appendix.

During the site visit the review panel discussed its preliminary findings on each of the standards of ESG Part 2 and 3. The panel reached a consensus with regard to the compliance on each of the standards. After the site visit the panel wrote a draft report. Providing notes of interviews and texts for the report has been shared among the panel members. The panel secretary compiled the draft review report. The draft report was sent to SQAA to give them the opportunity for comments on factual accuracies. The panel discussed the response of SQAA and finalized the report. The secretary then sent the final report to SQAA after which the review process was completed.

In this report the review panel assesses the compliance of SQAA to the ESG in the light of the evidence provided by the documentation, the interviews with the Agency and its stakeholders, and the observation of a procedure conducted by SQAA. Recommendations are addressed to SQAA with regard to the standards that have been found to be substantially or partially adhered to.

### ***1.3 Context of the review***

Tertiary education in Slovenia encompasses higher vocational education and higher education. All public and private higher education institutions must be accredited and entered into the register of higher education institutions at the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. Four universities are entered into the register of higher education institutions in the Republic of Slovenia: University of Ljubljana (public university),

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<sup>1</sup> JOQAR is the abbreviation of the ECA-led and EU funded project Joint programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded. For more information see: <http://www.eacaconsortium.net/main/projects/joqar>.

University of Maribor (public university), University of Primorska (public university), University of Nova Gorica (private university) and international association of universities EMUNI University. The universities are autonomous higher education institutions in the fields of science-research, art and education. For the establishment of a university, conditions for provision of study programmes in all three cycles and in at least three fields must be fulfilled.

Thirty five private higher education institutions are entered into the register, of which 1 art academy, 17 faculties and 17 professional colleges. A faculty carries out scientific-research and educational work in the fields of one or more related or interconnected scientific disciplines and takes care of their development. An art academy carries out artistic and educational work in the fields of one or several related or interconnected artistic disciplines and takes care of their development. Conditions for providing study programmes in at least two cycles have to be fulfilled for the establishment of art academies and faculties. A professional college carries out educational activity in the fields of one or more related or interconnected professions and takes care of their development. Conditions for providing study programmes in at least the first cycle must be fulfilled for the establishment of a professional college. If it is established in the accreditation procedure that the college has appropriate higher education teachers and fulfils the conditions for carrying out scientific-research or artistic activities, it may also carry out master's study programmes. Otherwise, it may do so only in cooperation with universities, faculties or art academies.

According to data of the Association of Slovene Higher Vocational Colleges Secretariat, 47 public and private higher vocational colleges operate in the Republic of Slovenia. Higher vocational colleges may be independent or organisational units of larger education centres that may also include secondary schools and business to business education centres. Upon fulfilling the conditions, students may transfer from higher vocational study programmes to first-cycle study programmes. Decisions in this regard are made by higher education institutions. Credit transfer system of studies, diploma supplement, accreditation of study programmes and quality system have been implemented in the entire tertiary education.

In Slovenia, wider interest in the Bologna process and the implementation of the Lisbon strategy, signed in 2000, started to be expressed only after 2002. For the introduction of all recommendations given by the Bologna declaration and the Lisbon strategy, Slovenia had to adopt a series of legal background documents in the area of tertiary education. In May 2004 the Act Amending the Higher Education Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 63/04) was adopted. This Act was the basis for the implementation of three priority tasks of the Bologna process, thus introducing fundamental changes: 1) adoption of a higher education system with three main cycles; 2) introduction of a system with easily recognisable and comparable levels; 3) introduction of the national quality assurance system. The first Bologna study programmes were offered in the 2005/2006 study year. Gradual introduction of the Bologna reform was completed in the 2009/2010 study year. Students in non-Bologna study programmes must complete their studies in the 2015/2016 study year. First cycle programmes in professional higher education and universities typically include 180 to 240 ECTS and last between three and four years. Master's programmes include between 60 and 120 ECTS and last between one and two years. Therefore, the total duration of programmes in the same field, including the first-cycle, is five years. Masters consisting of 60 ECTS allow students who have completed first-cycle studies consisting of 180 ECTS to complete additional course units in order to obtain the total 120 credits necessary to complete the Master's programme. Doctoral programmes include 180 credits and last three years. In spite of these regulations there is still no National Qualifications Framework in place.

SQAA was founded by law in March 2010 as the first independent public QA agency, and assumed some of the QA responsibilities of the Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia (CHERS) which had been operating since 2004. However, evaluation and accreditation activities in Slovenian higher education date back as far as 1994 and different organisations played a role in it. The self-evaluation report contains an overview of these historical developments. SQAA in its current form was established in 2010 with the Resolution on the

Founding of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education under Article 51.e. of Law on Higher education (LoHE, ZViS in Slovenian) by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 114/2009). The name of SQAA in Slovene is Nacionalna Agencija Republike Slovenije za kakovost v visokem šolstvu (NAKVIS).

Accreditation and external evaluation of higher education quality is founded on three main rules: (a) it is compulsory and universal, i.e. includes all public and private universities, study programmes as well as higher vocational colleges; (b) it is carried out by one, national accreditation agency (SQAA) established by the government, but given attributes of independence; (c) it is striving for implementation of international accreditation standards, including ESG, and intends to integrate the national quality assurance system with the European one. Art. 51f of LoHE lists the following 16 functions of the Agency:

- “oversee the functioning of the system of quality assurance in higher education and post-secondary professional education,
- determine procedures and criteria for external evaluations and accreditations and other criteria and regulations,
- determine the minimum criteria for election to titles of higher education teachers, scientific workers and higher education staff at higher education institutions,
- carry out external evaluations of higher education institutions and study programmes, and of higher vocational colleges,
- carry out accreditations of higher education institutions and study programmes,
- issue consent to the transformation of higher education institutions and to modifications of compulsory elements of study programmes of independent higher education institutions,
- establish and update the register of experts,
- appoint expert groups for external evaluations and accreditations, organise their training and participate in it,
- make public the decisions of the Agency, evaluation reports, annual evaluation and accreditation reports and analyses of the Agency, which must be transparent and accessible,
- keep publicly accessible records of accredited higher education institutions and study programmes,
- cooperate with higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges, advise them and promote the implementation of self-evaluations,
- cooperate with international institutions or bodies for quality assurance in higher education,
- oversee the conformity of the Agency's operation with EU guidelines and international principles in the field of quality assurance,
- collect and analyse reports on self-evaluations and external evaluations of higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges,
- perform development tasks in the field for which it has been established,
- perform other tasks in accordance with this Act and the memorandum of association.”

As can be seen from this list, the SQAA is responsible for the accreditation and evaluation of both institutions and programmes, as well as a range of other specified tasks.

SQAA consists of three bodies: the SQAA Council, the Director and the Appeal Committee.

The highest decision-making body is the SQAA Council. Its duties are set by the law. They include appointment and dismissal of the Director and the Appeal Committee, definition of procedures and criteria for accreditation, external evaluation, for entry of experts in the SQAA register and definition of other acts, deciding on accreditations and external evaluations, appointment of groups of experts, conflict of interests issues.

The Director represents and acts on behalf of the Agency, manages activities and operations of the Agency and attends to the implementation of decisions adopted by the SQAA Council. Due to many procedures, the first management appointed in 2010 primarily focused on the fundamental activity, accreditations and evaluations, with an emphasis on strict and formal verification of meeting minimum SQAA standards. In April 2012, the

SQAA Council replaced the management and appointed an experienced SQAA staff member as Acting Director. This management prepared a new working and financial plan for 2012 in compliance with the set strategic objectives until 2013. After a long search a Director was appointed in April 2013. The Director leads two organisational units, which are the Quality Department and the General Affairs Department. Employees in the Quality Department conduct accreditation and evaluation procedures and provide support to the SQAA management and the Council. The General Affairs Department provides expert support to the management in staffing-related procedures and in legal and financial issues. It assists the Quality Department in solving financial and legal issues in conducting procedures. It also assures that the Council and the Appeal Committee conduct their sessions in compliance with the regulations.

The Appeal Committee is appointed by the SQAA Council on the basis of a public call. The Appeal Committee is composed of the president and two members. Each member has a deputy. In performing its duties, it observes the Rules of Procedure of the SQAA Appeal Committee adopted on 11 February 2011.

## 2. Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines Part 2

### *ESG 2.1. Use of internal quality assurance procedures*

#### **Standards:**

*External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.*

#### **Guidelines:**

*The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met. If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.*

#### **Evidence:**

According to the provisions in the law and the adopted accreditation criteria (December 2010), each higher education institution and higher vocational college has to adopt internal quality assurance mechanisms which are laid down in a quality manual. SQAA evaluates the existence of such a system in case of initial accreditation and it checks the implementation in the framework of re-accreditation. However, during the procedure that the review panel observed there was not much attention given in the interviews to ESG Part 1 and the effectiveness of the internal QA system of the university.

The National Higher Education Programme 2011-2020 (July 2011) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology specifies that in 2017 a transition from programme to institutional accreditation should take place. The stated reasons for this shift are overburdening of the system and duplication when verifying individual operational elements of institutions. Samples of evaluation of new study programmes will be included in the institutional re-accreditation, as well as the verification of programmes in certain areas. It is further specified that this measure will only be adopted if the re-accreditation of all existing programmes will be completed by 2016 and if the programmes comply with the SQAA criteria and institutions have suitable internal QA mechanisms in place.

#### **Analysis:**

The existence respectively the functioning of internal QA systems at higher education institutions is something the SQAA Council takes into account when taking accreditation decisions. The institutions must prove that they regularly monitor the educational provisions and that they examine the satisfaction of students and stakeholders. As noted above SQAA experts could have more attention for the internal QA system during the interviews at the site visit. The review panel also found that internal QA systems at institutions have still ample room for improvement. Effective and coherent internal QA systems are a prerequisite for allowing external QA processes in Slovenia to become less intensive and rigorous (e.g. move towards institutional accreditation as main instrument of external QA). Interviews with the representatives of the HEIs and other HE stakeholders confirmed the panel in the belief that such a step could be foreseen within the next five to seven years.

However, to fulfil the ambition in the National Higher Education Programme 2011-2020 much more effort is needed by both SQAA and institutions to make the shift from programme to institutional accreditation. One can question whether 2017 is realistic for making this shift, or whether it would have to postpone with a few more years. Students were quite reserved about institutional accreditation; they maintained that it is important that SQAA sees all programmes, particularly at a time when not all programmes are set up along the Bologna requirements yet. The review panel noted that the current external QA system is overloaded with specific, sometimes quite prescriptive criteria. This makes it very difficult to make a shift within a few years to institutional responsibility for a less prescriptive internal QA system that suits the characteristics of a specific institution.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

Although the panel considers the standard to be substantially fulfilled it believes that there is room to strengthen the bridge between the external QA system in Slovenia and the internal QA systems of its HE institutions and colleges. After completing the cycle of programme accreditation, the panel recommends SQAA to consider future options to set up leaner external QA systems, focusing on the existence and implementation of good functioning internal QA systems at HE institutions. To fulfil the ambitions in the National Higher Education Programme 2011-2020 much more should be done by SQAA in partnership with institutions to build and strengthen internal QA systems. The current accreditation system with too many, very detailed and prescriptive criteria should be reconsidered in this respect. SQAA should also have a realistic view as to when the shift to institutional review is appropriate given the development stage of internal QA in the institutions.

## ***ESG 2.2. Development of external quality assurance processes***

**Standard:**

*The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.*

**Guidelines:**

*In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used. As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions.*

**Evidence:**

The external quality assurance system in the Slovenian higher education area is to some extent determined by the national legislation. SQAA, however, further developed the accreditation/evaluation criteria and procedures in a consultative process involving all key HE stakeholders in the country, i.e. representatives of Slovenian universities, private higher education institutions, higher vocational colleges, the Slovenian student union, employers and competent national bodies.

Regulations, information about the external QA system in Slovenia, and the accreditation criteria are published on the SQAA website. The following documents formally describe criteria and procedures:

- Criteria for the Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 95/2010, 17/2011, 51/201 and 6/2013 and SQAA website)
- Criteria for Transferring between Study Programmes (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 95/2010 and 17/2011)
- Criteria for the External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 9/2011)
- Criteria for the Accreditation of Study Programmes for Teacher Education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 94/2011),
- Criteria for Entry into Register of Experts (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 95/2010, 17/2011 and 22/2012)
- Criteria for the Allocation of Credits to Study Programmes under ECTS (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 95/2010)
- Minimum Standards for the Election to the Title of Higher Education Teacher, Researcher and Faculty Assistant at Higher Education Institutions (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 95/2010, 17/2011)
- Criteria for Transnational Higher Education (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 18/2012)

**Analysis:**

The panel found that institutions, the student union, employers and competent national bodies have been consulted by SQAA, e.g. when developing the accreditation and evaluation criteria. Accreditation and evaluation criteria have been submitted for comments to these different stakeholders and eventual complaints have been taken into account by the agency. Guides with information about the handling of the criteria and corresponding e-forms are published on the SQAA website. Accreditation and evaluation criteria have been developed by SQAA for the various objects of accreditation and evaluation.

The accreditation criteria are submitted to a continuous assessment and a wide consultation process in order to optimize their application and to take care of critique mentioned in satisfaction surveys by institutions, involved experts and SQAA staff. During the interviews, representatives of the institutions mentioned their full satisfaction with the latest criteria renewal process (to be terminated in summer 2013) and with the increasing professionalism of SQAA staff. All the criteria and procedures used by SQAA are published and easily accessible. If SQAA perceives a need of institutions or stakeholders, it organises workshops and may offer corresponding consultative services to the institutions.

**Conclusion:** fully compliant.

### ***ESG 2.3. Criteria for decisions***

***Standard:***

*Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.*

***Guidelines:***

*Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.*

**Evidence:**

SQAA publishes the accreditation criteria and provides information about their use and interpretation. The accreditation decisions are taken by the SQAA Council. For the purpose of the decision-making process, the Council reviews the self-evaluation report, the experts' evaluation report and any comments if submitted by the institution. The Council may either grant accreditation or reject application. The ex-post accreditation procedure uses a three-point scale: accreditation awarded, accreditation awarded conditionally, application for accreditation rejected. Accreditation decisions taken by SQAA are final and result in recognition or losing recognition by the government. In the latter case the recruitment of new students is suspended and the education of current students is continued until the completion of the full cycle. As far as higher education colleges are concerned, the power of decision-making is within the remit of the Minister of Education.

SQAA has several measures in place to guarantee consistency of the decision-making process. Such measures include:

- Training of experts, council members and staff
- Quality Manual, which describes the internal QA processes and mechanisms of the agency
- Manual for experts, shedding light into the use and interpretation of the accreditation criteria
- Staff being present and offering support to experts during site visits
- Well-functioning appeal system
- Surveys assuring feedback from HE stakeholders to the procedures and aiming at enhancement of the accreditation tools and instruments.

**Analysis:**

The consistency of interpretation and use of criteria was a source of problems in the past. In the past years, SQAA has put considerable effort to guarantee objective and transparent decision-making. Many consistency mechanisms have been introduced, including a rigorous training of experts, supported by a detailed manual which illuminates in detail the use and interpretation of the accreditation criteria. The panel found that stakeholders are now satisfied with the work of SQAA and the use of the accreditation criteria and standards. The panel understood that SQAA recently has taken special care in developing measurable and applicable accreditation criteria. However, the system is still young and transparency of the decision-making process could still be further enhanced by the agency. The review panel noted that the staff members agreed that they are missing a database and other IT tools to support the process from applications to decision-making. Considering the size of operations and the number of procedures and decisions these database-driven IT tools are a must for continued consistency in decision-making.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

SQAA should consider describing and publishing all steps of the decision-making process and organise seminars or other types of events to introduce these to stakeholders. A database and appropriate IT tools to support the decision-making process are needed and should be implemented.

## **ESG 2.4. Processes fit for purpose**

### **Standard:**

*All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.*

### **Guidelines:**

*Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes. Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance. Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:*

- *insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;*
- *the exercise of care in the selection of experts;*
- *the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;*
- *the use of international experts;*
- *participation of students;*
- *ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;*
- *the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up model of review;*
- *recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement*
- *policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.*

### **Evidence:**

The accreditation/evaluation process is organized in a coherent manner and encompasses the following steps: provision of guidelines to the institutions, self-evaluation phase, selection of trained experts, on-site visit (not in case of initial accreditation), preliminary report of experts, response of institution/study programmes regarding factual accuracy of draft reports, final expert reports sent to SQAA, accreditation decisions taken by the Council, publication of results, follow up to a varying degree.

The procedures of SQAA follow the pre-set objectives of assuring and enhancing the quality of HE institutions, higher vocational colleges and study programmes. SQAA has given special attention to the appropriate selection and training of experts, enabling them to perform their job with a high degree of professionalism. They provide institutions and programmes with recommendations for further enhancement of their performances. Article 51u LoHE states that the panel shall consist of at least three experts, including at least one foreign expert and one student. Specific expert panels for evaluating a given programme or institution are assembled autonomously by SQAA.

Student participation in Slovenian higher education is significant with 20% students represented on faculty level and institutional level, and with student members in the SQAA Council, evaluation bodies and expert panels. The review panel heard in the interviews that in general students feel accepted in the Agency and in the expert teams. Students are involved in the decision-making of the Agency and in the revision of criteria. The Council would like to have more students involved from different fields.

Until recently, recommendations for HEIs could not be included in the assessment report. Thereby promoting enhancement of the quality assurance system was problematic. Fortunately this has changed since last year, and making recommendations is now encouraged as is evident in the Manual for experts.

### **Analysis:**

The review panel highly endorses the efforts of SQAA to assure professionalism, efficiency and success of the expert's mission. Experts are recruited by a public call or by invitation of SQAA. Candidates are checked against

a set of predetermined selection criteria. Those experts who fulfil the entry criteria will undergo a 4 days training, encompassing simulations, analysis of best practices and workshops on how to write reports. International experts are so far exempt from this training, but they are carefully selected by SQAA. Student members of SQAA panels are being provided training by both SQAA and the National Union of Students to ensure their preparation for this type of review.

There are currently some 30 foreign experts. In order to minimise the risk of conflict of interests of experts, code of ethics are applied and experts sign a confidentiality and non-conflict of interest statement. SQAA has in place a coherent recruitment system for experts, an extensive training programme, the tools assuring their formal independence and a code of ethics. However, the review panel also noted during the observation of a procedure that the extensive training did not prevent some shortcomings in the conduct of the site visit by the SQAA experts. The SQAA experts were sometimes judgmental in the interviews (the university “must, should, need do” and experts used examples from their own universities). The student expert was rather passive and not leading the interview sessions with students. The internal QA system of the university received too little attention in the interviews. Perhaps these topics should gain a greater emphasis during the experts training. SQAA and student representatives could also explore ways to further increase student involvement given the importance and valuable insights that their participation provides.

Moreover, sometimes experts are in informal relationships with employees of the evaluated HEI. This is because of the small scale of the Slovenian HE system and those who are evaluated may evaluate the experts later on in another procedure. There is one case of exerting pressure on the expert panel mentioned in the self-evaluation report. The interviews on site made clear that despite of the efforts mentioned above the independence of experts is a topic of continued concern due to the relatively small size of the country. More involvement of foreign experts could solve this issue. The panel also noted that the pool of qualified national and international experts participating in the QA procedures in Slovenia is still limited (about 150 experts have been entered into the SQAA experts register by the end of 2012). In some fields there is a lack of experts.

The accreditation system in its current form expects experts to formulate recommendations giving arguments for improving the quality system. The Manual for experts also give guidelines as to how experts should formulate their recommendations. The assessment reports hold many recommendations on the basis of which conditional accreditations were granted. First and foremost, those recommendations are seemingly concerned with HEIs complying with minimum requirements. Recommendations could be written in a way that it facilitates enhancement strategies to a greater extent. The SQAA policy and accreditation procedures promote an enhancement approach in evaluating internal quality assurance systems. However, the success rate in that area is limited due to the confidential nature of evaluation reports. Hence, not all HEIs are aware of best practices.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

The review panel recommends SQAA to intensify its efforts to recruit and train well qualified domestic and international experts who are able to participate as independent panel members in the various QA procedures (domain specialists, institutional specialists, labour market specialists, international experts, students etc.). It should be avoided that the same experts from the universities constantly visit each other. Therefore, it is especially recommended to recruit more international experts to tackle the problem that experts know each other too well in the small Slovenian HE system. A problem in this respect is that evaluated programmes and institutions have the legal right to speak in Slovene (this means that during the site visit either translation has to be provided or the foreign experts should understand Slovene). In general, internationalisation of higher education is hampered by some provisions in the national legislation, e.g. that the classes provided to students should be in Slovene. One cannot organise classes in English unless there is an equivalent in Slovene. Considering its international ambitions there is an apparent need to further internationalise both the QA

system and the HE system, and to remove obstacles in national legislation. The involvement of foreign experts in QA procedures would profit from this.

## ***ESG 2.5. Reporting***

### **Standard:**

*Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.*

### **Guidelines:**

*In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership. Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone. In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations. There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers. Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.*

### **Evidence:**

SQAA publishes the decisions of the QA procedures on its website, but it does not publish the report of the expert group in charge of the external assessment.

### **Analysis:**

In all SQAA procedures, the group of external experts prepare a joint report which serves as the important basis for the SQAA Council decisions. Whereas the Council decisions (both positive and negative decisions) are published on the SQAA website, the assessment report of the experts group is not. During the site visit the review panel tried to explore SQAA perception towards the possibility of publishing the reports. The panel noted no objections against publishing the expert reports when interviewing the HEI representatives and the other HE stakeholder groups. The HEIs wanted to make sure that they could comment to the expert group's reports. It also became evident that the publication of the expert panels report would not pose any legal problems. There was an advice of the Ombudsman that publishing the names of experts could be controversial. But this could be solved by publishing the reports without the names of experts. Another obstacle for publishing the reports that was mentioned was that the consistency of reports was not assured as the reports are written by different experts. However, this has improved with the Quality Manual for Experts and experts trainings.

A remarkable feature of the SQAA system is that SQAA staff has no involvement at all in the writing of the experts report<sup>2</sup>. They also do not take minutes of interviews for the experts panels. During the observation by the review panel 3 SQAA staff were present at the site visit but activities such as writing minutes of meetings for the experts or monitoring that all criteria and questions are covered could not be observed. Most European QA agencies involve their staff in the report writing, either in an editing capacity or even in writing the draft report on the basis of the input of the experts. Involvement of staff members enhances the consistency of

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<sup>2</sup> What SQAA staff do and not do is explicitly described in the Manual for Experts, e.g. page 14: "they do not write, translate or edit the report for the group of experts".

reports and makes it easier to publish these. In the interviews with stakeholders it was also noted that a lot of knowledge is assembled among SQAA staff and that it is a pity that SQAA experts cannot make use of that by more actively involving SQAA staff in the procedure. If SQAA could consider giving staff representatives some secretarial duties, this will both ensure coherence of the general report writing and ease the burden of taking notes for the experts so that they could exclusively focus on conducting interviews.

The publication of reports by groups of experts was mentioned as a recommendation in the self-evaluation report of SQAA. In the final interview with the SQAA management it was assured that from fall 2013 onwards SQAA will publish the reports of the expert panel in an unchanged form, in due respect of the personal protection rights (no names in the report).

Under the previous management SQAA was discouraging experts from giving recommendations in their reports and the focus was on compliance to the minimum standards. This policy has changed recently, there is now much more attention for issues beyond compliance and to deliver reports which are useful for the quality improvement of institutions and programmes. The panel noted that this adaptation was not creating any problems and seemed to be approved and even welcomed by institutional representatives and other stakeholders.

**Conclusion:** partially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

SQAA has to publish the entire expert panel reports on the SQAA website. To increase consistency of the reports it is recommended that SQAA staff will be involved in the report writing. Opportunities for users and readers should be provided to comment on the usefulness of the information and the readability of the reports.

## ***ESG 2.6. Follow-up procedures***

***Standard:***

*Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.*

***Guidelines:***

*Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: It should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.*

**Evidence:**

According to SQAA regulations, all re-accreditation procedures assess the progress made since the initial or last accreditation. SQAA has also introduced the special instrument of „extraordinary evaluation“. This is an external assessment which can be carried out any time on the initiative of HEIs, foundation bodies, students, the government, etc.

**Analysis:**

For all external QA procedures in Slovenia, follow-up activities are common. In initial accreditations and evaluations the HEIs are expected to follow the recommendations of the expert panel, the progress being assessed at the next QA cycle. Re-accreditation is normally granted for seven years but this time period can be shortened in case of discovered weaknesses (then a new external evaluation will take place). The „extraordinary evaluations“ allow interferences of SQAA at any time if there is reasonable ground for a suspected existence of serious infringements.

SQAA is implementing a policy of regular seminars and workshops with HEIs so that recurrent issues in QA procedures that are noted by SQAA and HEIs can be discussed and good practices can be compared. The review panel suggests to further intensify the counselling of institutions and programmes in order to help them to fix discovered weaknesses in QA procedures and to promote the establishment of a quality culture within HE institutions and higher vocational colleges. Counselling could obtain a more prominent place in the Agency's operations but of course conflicts of interest between counselling and accreditations/evaluations should be prevented. This can e.g. be achieved by not involving a counselling staff member in the accreditation/evaluation of the same institution.

**Conclusion:** fully compliant.

## ***ESG 2.7. Periodic reviews***

### **Standard:**

*External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.*

### **Guidelines:**

*Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not "once in a lifetime". It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodically renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.*

### **Evidence:**

Current legislation stipulates periodic reviews in the process of accreditation each seven years and in the process of evaluation each five years. Initial and ex-post accreditation may be awarded for seven years if the HEI satisfies all criteria and any deficiencies identified could not cause deterioration of the quality of education. In case of significant shortcomings, the accreditation can be awarded for three years. During that period the HEI has to eliminate within a year shortcomings concerning the teaching and the scientific staff, and all other faults within six months.

### **Analysis:**

Evaluation of higher vocational colleges has a validity of five years, and then re-assessment is foreseen. Initial accreditation is granted for a maximum of seven years, then the study programmes and HE institutions have to be re-accredited. Re-accreditation is normally granted for seven years. Before re-accreditation, HEIs have to submit the documentation from the previous evaluations. Seven years is, from an international comparative perspective, at the longer side of the spectrum of accreditation periods in Europe. The panel suggests to SQAA to consider shortening the cycle of periodic reviews for all initial QA procedures from seven to five years.

**Conclusion:** fully compliant.

## **ESG 2.8. System-wide analysis**

### **Standard:**

*Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments, etc.*

### **Guidelines:**

*All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.*

### **Evidence:**

For the years 2007/8 and for the year 2009 the predecessor of SQAA published two reports which dealt with the topic of assuring and assessing quality in the Slovenian higher education area. In the past three years since the existence of SQAA, such exercise could not be repeated, but plans and preparations do exist to publish a system-wide analysis by the end of 2013. Other reports, such as wide-ranging surveys among stakeholders have been conducted by SQAA in the past years.

### **Analysis:**

In the past two encompassing reports were issued dealing with quality assurance in Slovenian HE. These reports offered a good insight into the external quality assurance system in Slovenia. Examples of good practices in quality assurance have been included, providing a stimulus for HEIs to develop their internal quality assurance systems and to strive towards a quality culture. Recommendations for the further development of the HE system in Slovenia have been given too. In the past three years it was not possible for SQAA to repeat such an exercise due to understaffing, organisational changes and multiple legal adaptations and challenges. However, in the past three years a lot of material has been collected by SQAA and analysed which can serve as an excellent basis for the next system-wide analysis. In particular the extensive surveys among stakeholders with regard to satisfaction with SQAA performances should be mentioned. Furthermore, the system-wide analysis can look into the reports of experts and self-evaluation reports of institutions. Other recent documents will be useful in this respect too, such as proposals for new accreditation criteria and standards, the strategy plan 2012, etc. SQAA intends to publish a report with such a system-wide analysis by the end of 2013. The management of SQAA has expressed a firm commitment to the review panel to indeed make this happen.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

### **Recommendation:**

The review panel recommends SQAA to carry out a system-wide analysis concerning QA developments in the Slovenian higher education system from 2010-2013. The report should include trends in internal QA processes and identify good practices. This is also important for the envisaged shift in some years from programme to institutional accreditation. This report should be finished by the end of 2013 and published on the SQAA website. Of course such system-wide analyses should be done regularly (e.g. again in 2014/2015).

## 3. Compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines

### Part 3

#### ***ESG 3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education***

**Standard:**

*The external quality assurance agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance procedures described in Part 2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.*

**Guidelines:**

*The standards for external quality assurance contained in Part 2 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. The standards reflect best practices and experiences gained through the development of external quality assurance in Europe since the early 1990s. It is therefore important that these standards are integrated into the processes applied by external quality assurance agencies towards the higher education institutions. The standards for external quality assurance should together with the standards for external quality assurance agencies constitute the basis for professional and credible external quality assurance of higher education institutions.*

**Evidence:**

The compliance of SQAA with ESG Part 2 has been addressed in Chapter 2 (ESG 2.1 – 2.8).

**Analysis:**

Compliance to the ESG 2.1-2.8 has been analysed in Chapter 2. The conclusions were that SQAA is fully compliant with ESG 2.2, 2.6 and 2.7. SQAA is substantially compliant with ESG 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, and 2.8. The Agency has been found to partially comply with ESG 2.5. Therefore, compliance to ESG Part 2 should be assessed overall as substantially compliant.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

The panel refers to the recommendations made with regard to ESG 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and 2.8.

#### ***ESG 3.2 Official status***

**Standard:**

*Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.*

**Evidence:**

SQAA in its current form was established in 2010 with the Resolution on the Founding of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education under Article 51.e. of Law on Higher education (LoHE, ZViS in Slovenian) by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 114/2009). SQAA is an independent, national accreditation agency funded from the government budget and operating as a

legal entity under public law. Its accreditation decisions carry legal consequences for HEIs under evaluation, which ought to subject themselves to accreditation.

**Analysis:**

SQAA has a clear legal status. It is officially recognised as the national agency with responsibility for external QA by the Ministry of Education and based on the existing legal framework. The self-evaluation documents, work plan, and the interviews held with SQAA and its stakeholders leave no doubt that SQAA fully complies with its legal tasks and the requirements of the legislation.

SQAA also strives to be recognised internationally and to comply with the ESG; the membership of ENQA and EQAR is one of the strategic goals. With this review it underwent, for the first time, an external evaluation for purposes of EQAR membership. Later in 2013 there are plans for an external evaluation by an ENQA review panel.

**Conclusion:** fully compliant.

### ***ESG 3.3 Activities***

**Standard:**

*Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.*

**Guidelines:**

*These may involve evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities and should be part of the core functions of the agency.*

**Evidence:**

The duties of SQAA are laid down in Article 51.f of ZVIS (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No 32/2012-official consolidated text, 40/2012-ZUJF, 57/2012-ZPCP- 2D, 109/2012). Its core activities are:

- carrying out accreditations and external evaluations of higher education institutions, their study programmes and higher vocational colleges;
- designing procedures and criteria for external evaluation and accreditation;
- criteria for the design and adoption of joint study programmes;
- keep publicly accessible records of accredited higher education institutions and study programmes,
- overseeing of the system of quality assurance in higher education and post-secondary professional education
- international cooperation with other bodies for QA and ensure conformity to EU and international guidelines in the field of QA.

Article 32 of the Higher Education Act stipulates that higher education institutions shall accredit study programmes with the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education at least every seven years. Article 51 contains quite detailed provisions concerning initial accreditation and re-accreditation of institutions and programmes, extraordinary evaluation of higher education institutions and study programme implementation, the evaluation of higher vocational colleges, as well as the formation of expert groups, and maintaining a register of experts and public records.

Since March 2010, when SQAA was founded, until 2012 the Agency took 407 accreditation decisions. Initial accreditation was awarded to 177 programmes (of three education cycles) and ex-post accreditation to 66 programmes. Nine private HEIs were granted accreditation (including one re-accreditation) as well as two universities. Negative decisions were made with respect to 26 programmes and 4 HEIs.

**Analysis:**

Although the law (LoHE) mentions accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and programmes in several articles 51.o, 51.r, 51.š and 51.t, we gathered, that , with the first (initial) programme accreditation there is usually no visit of the site, but with the reaccreditation procedure the external evaluation is always necessary, which is also the case with external evaluation of the high vocational colleges and at extraordinary evaluations. The SQAA Business Report for 2012 lists under the heading “Accreditations and external evaluations in higher education” first accreditations of 93 study programmes and reaccreditations of 68 study programmes. There were 6 institutions which were granted first accreditation and 1 institution was reaccredited. External evaluations were performed in higher vocational education (13 site visits and 7 “opinions on compliance with standards laid down by law” in 2012).

Extraordinary evaluations are performed upon request: usually SQAA received complaint letters from students. In the past years, the Agency went through many revisions and some internal turmoil in 2012. Nevertheless the agency was capable to achieve its mission and objectives. In fact, the year 2012 saw a significant increase in the total number of accreditations (from 60 to 168). The review panel wishes to commend the SQAA (staff, management and Council) for this fact. In addition, SQAA has been involved in recent years in international projects. These projects contribute to the development of SQAA’s activities, e.g. in the field of accreditation of joint programmes, where the panel heard from institutional representatives that there is still work to be done.

**Conclusion:** fully compliant.

### ***ESG 3.4 Resources***

**Standard:**

*Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.*

**Evidence:**

SQAA is an independent, national accreditation agency funded from the government budget and operating as a legal entity under public law. It has the status of a direct non-governmental budget spending authority, which negotiates its budget directly with the Ministry of Finance.

In March 2012 the Agency started with 10 employees, this has more than doubled now to 22 staff members. About half of the staff is financed from the national budget, whilst the other half is funded through the European Social Fund (ESF). This funding is expected to stop after 2014. The staff status is similar to civil servants, including the payments and promotion opportunities of staff. The Agency is still able to ensure competitive salaries within the public sector. Due to the economic crisis and subsequent governmental savings the budget for QA operations, investments and materials was significantly reduced in 2012. Through negotiations with the government and ESF some reductions could be softened.

**Analysis:**

Although the work load is intense and additional human resources would be helpful for the operations of the Agency, there is no prominent shortage of staff at the moment. In 2012 and 2013 staff satisfaction surveys were held. Whilst the 2012 survey showed general dissatisfaction of staff and poor motivation, the satisfaction rate and motivation of staff went up significantly in the 2013 survey when a new management had been appointed.

The Agency has a special position in the state budget. It is funded as a separate budget item, comparable to e.g. the Constitutional Court, Ombudsman etc. By law the government is obliged to finance the Agency. SQAA is not part of the Ministry of Education but negotiates its budget directly with the Ministry of Finance. This special position might protect SQAA to some extent from severe budget cuts by the government that will be executed due to the financial crisis. However, the ESF funds that finance half of the staff are only guaranteed until the end of 2014. If no or insufficient new ESF funding will be available the question is whether the Slovenian government will be both inclined and capable to fill this financial gap.

The review panel heard that the Ministry of Education believes that the solution cannot only come from the government. SQAA has to make an effort to obtain additional funds. The possibilities, however, seem limited. Currently the law does not allow SQAA to charge fees to Slovenian institutions for its accreditation services. Another option would be to evaluate abroad and charge fees for these foreign operations. Unfortunately it is not possible to evaluate abroad under the current law. Another option that SQAA was also considering, as expressed during the interviews, was to charge institutions for consultancy services.

In sum, the current human, financial and other resources enable SQAA to accomplish its mission. However, the future is quite uncertain due to the high dependence on ESF funds, the expected budget cuts in the Slovenian public sector, and the legal barrier to charge accreditation fees to institutions.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

It is in best interest of the Slovenian state that the QA system that has been set up and is receiving growing acceptance and even appreciation among stakeholders can be maintained. Sufficient resources for SQAA are also needed to fund the transition from programme to institutional accreditation that the government is planning after the current accreditation cycle. As the ESF funding is likely to end or significantly reduced in about a year, the review panel recommends SQAA to consider alternative funding possibilities and to make a financial plan in consultation with the government to secure its funding after 2014.

### ***ESG 3.5 Mission statement***

***Standard:***

*Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.*

***Guidelines:***

*These statements should describe the goals and objectives of agencies' quality assurance processes, the division of labour with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the cultural and historical context of their work. The statements should make clear that the external quality assurance process is a major activity of the agency and that there exists a systematic approach to achieving its goals and objectives. There should also be documentation to demonstrate how the statements are translated into a clear policy and management plan.*

**Evidence:**

Since 2011 SQAA has a clear mission, vision and values defined. This document is publicly available and on it the SQAA strategy for 2011-2016 has been based. Mission, vision, values and strategy have been decided on by the Council after consultations with the SQAA staff. SQAA verifies the implementation of the strategy at the end of each calendar through a special report on the work and operation of the agency. This report includes an examination of the causes of possible deviations from planned activities.

**Analysis:**

The mission of SQAA is:

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

The vision of SQAA is:

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

The values laying the foundations for SQAA’s operations are: independence, responsibility, transparency, professionalism, efficiency and commitment to progress.

The strategic objectives that have been adopted by SQAA for 2011-2016 are:

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

The review panel concludes that the mission statement, the vision, values, strategy, and annual work plans are well defined and interconnected. Nevertheless, the panel holds the opinion that the further implementation in the work plans could be clearer (e.g. executive objectives, implementation goals and activities are mentioned). Moreover, the annual plans show a large number of activities which could be prioritised further to ensure that the annual planning remains feasible and does not lead to demotivation because too many goals are not achieved.

**Conclusion:** fully compliant.

## ***ESG 3.6 Independence***

### ***Standard:***

*Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.*

### ***Guidelines:***

*An agency will need to demonstrate its independence through measures, such as:*

- *its operational independence from higher education institutions and governments*
- *is guaranteed in official documentation (e.g. instruments of governance or legislative acts);*
- *the definition and operation of its procedures and methods, the nomination and appointment of external experts and the determination of the outcomes of its quality assurance processes are undertaken autonomously and independently from governments, higher education institutions, and organs of political influence;*
- *while relevant stakeholders in higher education, particularly students/learners, are consulted in the course of quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.*

**Evidence:**

SQAA is an independent, national accreditation agency funded from the government budget and operating as a legal entity under public law. It has the status of a direct non-governmental budget spending authority, which negotiates its budget directly with the Ministry of Finance. Its accreditation decisions carry legal consequences for HEIs under evaluation, which ought to subject themselves to accreditation.

The Council is the decision-making body of the Agency and consists of 11 members who are appointed by the stakeholders in higher education as follows (Article 51h):

- three members are appointed by the Rectors Conference,
- one member is appointed by representative association of private higher education institutions,
- one member is appointed by the representative association of higher vocational colleges,
- two members are appointed by the representative organisation of students in cooperation with the student councils,
- one member is appointed by the representative employers' associations by agreement,
- one member is appointed by the representative unions from the field of higher education by agreement,
- two members are appointed by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia based on public invitation, namely one from among the experts in the field of higher education or its quality assurance who study or work in the Republic of Slovenia, and the other one from among the experts in the field of higher education or its quality assurance who study or work abroad.

Article 51h of the law stipulates that: "Members of the Agency Council shall act in an expert, independent and autonomous manner and shall not be bound by the decisions, positions and instructions of institutions that appointed them or of other institutions." In accordance with Article 51h, the rectors and vice-chancellors of universities, deans, members of senates of universities, of the universities' members or of private higher education institutions or other organisations providing higher education, and headmasters or directors of higher vocational colleges, may not be appointed to the SQAA Council.

The SQAA Council members are appointed for the term of six years, the student representatives for the term of two years. An individual member may be re-appointed, but for maximum two consecutive terms. Upon the SQAA Council's constitution, half of non-student members are appointed for the term of three years. The SQAA Council selects members with three-year term by lot. The Council members appoint the President and Vice-President of the SQAA Council from among themselves. To ensure independence and impartiality, the Council members exclude themselves from discussion and voting in procedures regarding higher education institutions at which they work or programmes in which they participate.

The Agency has certain discretion to set up detailed accreditation procedures and criteria. In accordance with Article 51e it is „independent and autonomous in its operation“. SQAA is guaranteed by law the independence to design criteria for external evaluation (Article 51f).

**Analysis:**

SQAA operates fully independent of the government, HEIs and stakeholder organisations. Council members are not responsible to the institutions or government. Members of the Council are getting dismissed if proven not to be independent. When a particular decision is made in which they have a potentially conflicting interest, they have to leave the room and the others vote. In each Council session there are approximately 5 abstainments of decision-making.

Also assured is the independence of expert panels carrying out the assessments, and bearing responsibility for writing the assessment reports. Rights and responsibilities of experts are presented in-depth in the Manual for Experts. Experts involved in the review panels sign every year a no-conflict-of-interests declaration. In every particular review panel, they must mention if they find themselves in this kind of situation. Equally, every institution hosting the review can state if a certain expert is in a conflict of interest. The SQAA council discusses these situations and may appoint a new expert or even a new panel if necessary.

The Appeal Committee is also independent; the profile of the people that can fill the positions for this committee is very strict due to the law. There is no interference between the Council and the Appeal Committee. The Council does study the decisions of the Appeal Committee to see what can be learned from it.

The legal provisions confirm the operational independence of the Agency. Notwithstanding the regulations, the framework and procedures may come under pressure from politicians and the Minister. Indicative of that fact is a case last year when attempts were made to amend the law and restrict the independence of the Agency. In this proposal of the previous government all members of the Council would be appointed by the government. After resistance of SQAA and when a new government came to power this proposal was withdrawn. It does show, however, that QA agencies always have to stay alert when it comes to safeguarding their independence.

**Conclusion:** fully compliant.

### ***ESG 3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies***

**Standard:**

*The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:*

- *a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;*
- *an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;*
- *publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;*
- *a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.*

**Guidelines:**

*Agencies may develop and use other processes and procedures for particular purposes. Agencies should pay careful attention to their declared principles at all times, and ensure both that their requirements and processes are managed professionally and that their conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner, even though the decisions are formed by groups of different people. Agencies that make formal quality assurance decisions or conclusions which have formal consequences should have an appeals procedure. The nature and form of the appeals procedure should be determined in the light of the constitution of each agency.*

**Evidence:**

SQAA's proposed accreditation and evaluation criteria were consulted with key stakeholders, i.e. representatives of Slovenian universities, private higher education institutions, higher vocational colleges, the Slovenian Student Union, employers and competent national bodies.

The Agency assures extensive training for its members and experts. Important elements of the accreditation infrastructure are the Quality Manual, Manual for experts, the Training Manual for Candidates, Criteria for experts. The last document stipulates criteria for candidates applying for the status of SQAA expert. As of 2011 the Agency holds an official Register of its experts. Student members are also provided with training: one training from the Slovenian Students Union and the second one from SQAA.

Apart from exceptional cases, initial accreditation does not require a site visit. This decision is made based on the self-evaluation report and publicly available sources of information. A site visit is required for programme and institutional re-accreditation. Observers, being members of the Council, Agency employees as well as candidates for experts, can all take part in a site visit. All significant changes made to the programme by the HEI are subject to evaluation and accreditation.

The Appeal Committee is regulated by Article 51j of the Higher Education Act. The members are appointed by the SQAA Council on the basis of a public call. The Appeal Committee is composed of 3 members. Each member has a deputy who shall replace members in the event of their absence or exclusion. The members must have a background in law and have worked for at least 5 years in a court. The members elect from among themselves a chair and deputy chair.

#### **Analysis:**

It is fair to say the SQAA has a full-ended range of formal and legal solutions regulating how it operates. The majority of those documents were put in place in 2012. Accreditation standards were developed by the SQAA in consultation with HEI representatives. They were published in Criteria for the Accreditation and External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programmes. That comprehensive, voluminous document has references to the ESG and describes procedures and requirements with regard to institutions applying for accreditation and expert team work. It is divided into institutional and programme accreditation carried out ex ante (so-called initial accreditation) and accreditation carried out ex-post (the so-called re-accreditation). Moreover, drawn up separately were standards for evaluating doctoral studies and evaluation criteria for joint programmes and transnational education.

All standards are grouped into six sets reflecting key areas subject to evaluation: integration with the environment, functioning of the higher education institution, human resources, student affairs, resources and infrastructure, internal quality assurance system. For purposes of programme evaluation two additional standards are taken into account, namely demand for the study programme and the organisation and provision of education. In each of the aforementioned areas, expert panels use many detailed criteria. Some of these come more as requirements towards the organisation of the HEI itself than that these are directly related to the evaluation of educational quality. A typical example would be a provision concerning the third area which stipulates that the person responsible for student affairs shall be employed at the institution.

Institutional accreditation is based on 44 criteria within the 6 key areas mentioned above. Many of these criteria are also detailed. For example, one criterion of organisational character specifies that all study areas and academic disciplines ought to be equally represented in the Senate of the HEI. Some of the criteria are duplicated, e.g. regular collection and analysis of data on the learning outcomes of students and overall education and other related activities is included as no. 4 in area 6 and criterion 7 in area 4.

The evaluation of first and second cycle programmes uses 18 detailed criteria concerning practically all aspects of accreditation, i.e. learning outcomes, enrolment, curriculum, studies organisation etc. In order to evaluate third cycle studies, three additional criteria are used. A separate set of 50 evaluation criteria was designed for higher vocational colleges.

The number of criteria is high. This does open the door to multiple interpretations thus creating a risk that these criteria could be misconstrued by different expert panels and SQAA Council members taking accreditation decisions. The Agency makes efforts to prevent that from happening by providing intensive training to experts and Council members. In a survey sent to all stakeholders, experts taking part in ex-post accreditation were critical about the clarity of the wording of criteria (score of 1.7 on five-point scale) and guidelines for drawing up the report (1.5). It was most problematic to unequivocally and unambiguously interpret criteria concerning teaching and scientific staff as well as scientific research. Consequently the criteria were revised and amendments to legal regulations suggested. A review of Accreditation Criteria and Evaluation Criteria is planned for 2013.

Learning outcomes are rather narrowly defined, indicative of which is Article no. 3 SQAA Criteria for Accreditation and External Evaluation which mentions knowledge and skills only. It is mentioned that the programme has to be consistent with educational goals and learning outcomes, but other elements of the educational process, e.g. the teaching staff are not clearly linked with the learning outcomes. There are few references on how to assess whether the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Learning outcomes are neither referred to in the Agency's strategic goals. The reason may be that no National Qualifications

Framework for higher education is in place. The Agency's efforts to evaluate the achieved learning outcomes in the labour market with regard to the employability of students are noted. According to student representatives learning outcomes are very important for students and help them to understand what they are studying. However, learning outcomes are still weakly developed in Slovenian higher education.

During the observation of a procedure the review panel noted that SQAA does not provide clear guidelines on how to write a self-evaluation report. This resulted in an extensive self-evaluation report that was merely descriptive, with sometimes very detailed information but very little self-evaluation of that information. Especially missing from the report was an analysis of the evidence required to evaluate to what extent individual criteria were met.

With regard to reporting, the absence of publication of experts reports was already elaborated in Part 2 (ESG 2.5). The compliance to follow-up procedures was noted in ESG 2.6.

The HEIs may dispute the SQAA Council decisions by making an appeal to the Appeals Committee, both in respect of formal issues and against the underlying accreditation decision. If the appeal of the HEI against the Council decision is sustained, then the case is revisited by the SQAA Council. The Committee's decisions are final but can be appealed against in court.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

SQAA is recommended to critically assess its accreditation criteria, reduce the number of criteria, especially the very detailed ones which are not essential for quality. At the same time more attention should be paid to criteria which are presently underemphasised, most notably with regard to learning outcomes. Also the development of guidelines for writing self-critical, less detailed and more to the point self-evaluation reports is advisable. SQAA should consider providing a guide to lay down its expectations to the institutions towards how a SER should look like. This will not only assure consistency between the SERs (and could provide data later on for a system-wide analysis) but will also assure that the reports actually provide valuable information and not a too descriptive presentation.

## ***ESG 3.8 Accountability procedures***

***Standard:***

*Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.*

***Guidelines:***

*These procedures are expected to include the following:*

- 1. A published policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency itself, made available on its website;*
- 2. Documentation which demonstrates that:*
  - the agency's processes and results reflect its mission and goals of quality assurance;*
  - the agency has in place, and enforces, a no-conflict-of-interest mechanism in the work of its external experts;*
  - the agency has reliable mechanisms that ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties;*
  - the agency has in place internal quality assurance procedures which include an internal feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board); an internal reflection mechanism (i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement); and an external feedback mechanism (i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development) in order to inform and underpin its own development and improvement.*
- 3. A mandatory cyclical external review of the agency's activities at least once every five years.*

**Evidence:**

All decisions adopted by the SQAA Council are published on the SQAA website. All acts of the SQAA Council and the annual reports on the work of SQAA are also public. The Director submits the report on work and operation of SQAA once a year. This report is also regularly published on the website.

SQAA adopted its Quality Manual in 2011. The main purpose of the SQAA Quality Manual “is to provide for the SQAA quality system to be constantly established and assured, with a special emphasis on the development of quality culture.”

**Analysis:**

The SQAA Council follows the principle of transparency and accessibility in publishing policy reports as mentioned above. The Agency is now struggling to build an internal QA system. This started with the writing of the self-evaluation report last year. Within that context satisfaction surveys of staff were also carried out, first in 2012 and then in 2013. Stakeholders are also increasingly systematically asked for their input. After each re-accreditation procedure questionnaires for experts, HEIs and for staff will be sent. In initial accreditation procedures there should be annual surveys. A further example of good accountability procedures are the annual reports on the work and operation of the agency, including a critical reflection on why certain goals have not been achieved.

What is lacking, however, is a coherent internal QA system that brings all these separate QA activities together. With a Quality Manual one would assume to have a document that describes the internal QA system of the Agency. But this is not the case. The Quality Manual gives basic information on the Agency (e.g. the mission, vision, strategy, and values), lists the stakeholders and describes their involvement in the work of SQAA, describes the duties of different parts of the Agency, gives basic descriptions of procedures, documentation, communication channels, work plans and some other reports, and it contains information on the facilities and finances. It reads like an introduction to the work and organisation of SQAA. The Quality Manual does not say how the Agency quality ensures itself, how the internal quality assurance system looks like, what its goals and indicators are, how information on the achievement of these goals is collected, how stakeholders are involved in this system (apart from their involvement in procedures), how internal feedback and reflection mechanisms, as well as responsibilities within the internal QA system take shape. It should be possible to develop such a document and thereby build a coherent internal QA system as a continuous basis for the accountability procedures of the Agency.

**Conclusion:** substantially compliant.

**Recommendation:**

SQAA is advised to implement a coherent internal QA system outlining the goals and indicators, monitoring and data collection tools, reporting of results, feedback mechanisms and responsibilities within the internal QA system.

## 4. Conclusions

In the light of the evidence provided by the documentation, the interviews with the Agency and its stakeholders, and the observation of a procedure conducted by SQAA, the review panel has assessed the compliance to the ESG Part 2 and 3. The panel found that SQAA fully complies with 7 standards, is substantially compliant to 8 standards, and partially complies with 1 standard. Recommendations were addressed to SQAA with regard to the standards that have been found to be substantially or partially adhered to. A summary of the recommendations made includes the following:

- After completing the cycle of programme accreditation, the panel recommends SQAA to consider future options to set up leaner external QA systems, focusing on the existence and implementation of good functioning internal QA systems at HE institutions. However, SQAA should have a realistic view as to when the shift from programme to institutional accreditation is appropriate given the development stage of internal QA in the institutions (ESG 2.1)
- The support of the decision-making could be improved by describing and clearly communicating to stakeholders all steps of the decision-making process, and by implementing a database and appropriate IT tools for procedures and decisions (ESG 2.3)
- More international experts should be recruited to tackle the problem that experts know each other too well in the small Slovenian HE system (ESG 2.4)
- SQAA has to publish the entire expert panel reports on its website, involve SQAA staff members in the report writing to increase consistency, and provide opportunities for users to comment on the usefulness of information and readability of the reports (ESG 2.5)
- A system-wide analysis report concerning QA developments in the Slovenian higher education area from 2010-2013, including trends and good practices in internal QA processes, should be published by SQAA by the end of 2013 and be repeated regularly (e.g. again in 2014/2015) (ESG 2.8)
- SQAA is advised to make a financial plan in consultation with the government to secure its funding after 2014 (ESG 3.4)
- SQAA is recommended to critically assess its accreditation criteria, reduce the number of criteria, especially the very detailed ones which are not essential for quality. More attention should be paid to the inclusion of learning outcomes and the development of guidelines for writing self-critical self-evaluation reports (ESG 3.7)
- SQAA is advised to implement a coherent internal QA system (ESG 3.8).

The review panel has found, in the self-evaluation report and in the context of the site visit, much to commend in SQAA's organisation and operations. External quality assurance has a long tradition in Slovenia (starting in the mid 90's) which helped the agency to develop as a professional and respected body. The panel noted the dynamic developments occurring in the past three years. During this period, very elaborated and helpful tools and instruments have been built up such as the experts manual, quality manual, new accreditation criteria etc. The creation of these tools was embedded in an intensive and wide consultation process, including students and the higher education institutions. All of the stakeholders the panel interviewed commended SQAA for the fast growth in professionalism, knowledge and support. The panel has learned that SQAA has prepared an action plan in May 2013 (the month after the site visit) based on its self-evaluation report.

The panel was also impressed that SQAA was able to maintain its operative capabilities in spite of management changes and the occurrence of many legal changes which asked for constant adaptations of the QA procedures. However, the review panel expresses its hope that in the near future legal changes would occur less frequently as it absorbs much energy from all SQAA staff members and has the potential to cause delays in the daily work of the agency. The panel is also very confident that with the new management in place the agency will find the calm and strength to further develop its qualities, to fix the gaps mentioned in this report and to implement the priorities set in the strategic plan of SQAA for the forthcoming years. There is no doubt that staff on all levels of

SQAA has the qualifications and a high commitment to bring SQAA to a prime position among European quality assurance agencies.

The panel would like to conclude the report with an encouragement of SQAA, the Ministry, the higher education institutions, students, experts and other stakeholders to jointly continue the high quality work and to further develop the Slovenian QA system in a coherent manner. The panel would like to thank SQAA for the outstanding hospitality and their excellent preparations and support of the review.

## Appendix: Programme of the site visit

### SCHEDULE FOR THE SITE VISIT OF SQAA

22 to 24 April 2013

<b>Monday 22 April 2013</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>What and where?</b>	<b>Who?</b>
<b>13.00 - 15.25</b>	<b>Arrival of the Review panel, lunch and preparatory meeting</b>  At the SQAA	Members of the panel
<b>15.30 - 16.10</b>	<b>Meeting with SQAA Council members and the president of the Council</b>  At the SQAA	<b>Prof. Dr. Maja Makovec Brenčič</b> – President of the SQAA Council <b>Prof. Dr. Lucija Čok</b> – Member of the SQAA Council <b>Prof. Dr. Andreja Kocijančič</b> – Member of the SQAA Council <b>Dr. Aleš Rotar</b> - Vice president of the SQAA Council – available via Skype (not used) Žiga Schmidt – student representative in the SQAA Council
<b>16.15 - 16.55</b>	<b>Meeting with the representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport</b>  At the SQAA	<b>Mag. Urban Krajcar</b> – Acting Director General, Dept. of Higher Education <b>Mag. Alenka Lisec</b> – Head of the ENIC NARIC <b>Mrs. Vanda Rode</b> – Department of Higher Education Dr. Stojan Sorčan – former Director General, Dept. of Higher Education
<b>17.00 - 17.40</b>	<b>Meeting with representatives of the universities, Higher education institutions and Vocational Colleges</b>  At the SQAA	<b>Prof. Dr. Julijana Kristl</b> – Vice Rector of the University of Ljubljana <b>Prof. Dr. Lučka Lorber</b> – Vice Rector of the University of Maribor <b>Prof. Dr. Iztok Arčon</b> – Representative of the University of Nova Gorica <b>Mag. Helena Cvikl</b> – Director of the Vocational College for Catering and Tourism Maribor Dr. Srečo Zakrajšek – Director of the IAM (private HEI) Mrs. Mateja Geder – representative from DOBA (private HEI)
<b>17.45 - 18.25</b>	<b>Meeting with the Director of the SQAA and former Acting Director</b>  At the SQAA	<b>Prof. Dr. Ivan Leban</b> – Director of the SQAA <b>Mrs. Tatjana Debevec</b> – former Acting Director of the SQAA
<b>18.30 - 19.15</b>	<b>Meeting with the SQAA professional</b>	<b>Dr. Alenka Braček Lalić</b> – Area I Senior

	<b>Staff</b>	Adviser <b>Mag. Jernej Širok</b> – Area II Senior Adviser <b>Mag. Dražen Šumiga</b> - undersecretary <b>Barbara Zupančič Kočar</b> - undersecretary <b>Klemen Šubic</b> – Area III Senior Adviser Andrej Krček – Area III Adviser Ivana Aleksandra Simčič - Financial and Accounting Assistant V
	At the SQAA	
<b>20.00 - 22.00</b>	<b>Dinner and preparation for next day</b>	
	Dinner at Sokol Restaurant	

<b>Tuesday 23 April 2013</b>	
<b>Review Panel observation of the external evaluation of the study programmes at the Faculty of Agriculture and Life Sciences of the University of Maribor</b>	
Time	What and who?
6.50	Departure from the Hotel in Ljubljana
8.30 – 9.00	Preparatory meeting of the SQAA group of experts
9.00–9.30	Meeting with the faculty management  Dean, vice-deans
9.45–10.45	Meeting with teachers  representatives of teachers, lecturers and administrators of programmes (8-10 participants)
11.00–11.45	Meeting with representatives of the QA Commission  (5 participants)
12.00–16.00	Tour of the Faculty's premises and agricultural estates Meranovo  Lunch with group of experts
16.15–17.00	Meeting with students of the second cycle study programmes (regular and part-time students)  (5 to 10 representatives)
17.15–18.00	Meeting with students of the third cycle study programmes  (5 representatives)
18.00–19.30	Working meeting of the Group of Experts
Evening	Departure to Ljubljana

<b>Wednesday 24 April 2013</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>What?</b>	<b>Who?</b>
<b>9.00 – 9.45</b>	<b>Meeting with the students representatives</b>	<b>Mitja Urbanc</b> – President of the Slovenian Student Union <b>Taja Železnik</b> – SQAA expert (student representative) <b>Erazem Bohinc</b> – SQAA expert (student representative)
<b>9.45 - 11.30</b>	<b>Preparation of conclusions</b>	
<b>11.30 – 11.45</b>	<b>Short meeting with the Director of the SQAA and former Acting Director</b>	<b>Prof. Dr. Ivan Leban</b> – Director of the SQAA <b>Mrs. Tatjana Debevec</b> – former Acting Director of the SQAA
<b>11.45 – 12.00</b>	<b>Oral Report</b>	SQAA
<b>12.00</b>	<b>Lunch and departure</b>	