SLOVAK ACCREDITATION AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (SAAHE)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE) was established in November 2018, following the adoption by the National Council of the Slovak Republic of the Quality Assurance Act. It has the necessary competencies to act as an independent public institution conducting external quality assurance of higher education. It has been an affiliate of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since March 2021 and is now applying for membership. It is also applying for inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The review evaluated the extent to which SAAHE complies with each of the standards of Parts 2 and 3 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). It was conducted in accordance with the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews and the EQAR Procedures for Applications.

A review panel was appointed by ENQA including two quality assurance experts, a senior academic from a higher education institution (HEI) and a student member. The panel visited the agency in Bratislava in March 2023.

In preparation for the review the agency submitted a detailed self-assessment, evaluating the quality of its activities and identifying areas for improvement. It also provided access to a range of relevant documentation to assist the panel in its enquiries.

The agency's mission is 'to contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education in the Slovak Republic by means of external quality assurance tools according to the ESG principles and in accordance with the expectations of stakeholders involved in education'. The Agency provides higher education institutions with an expert and independent view on the quality of education and fosters the development of a quality culture. In particular, the agency decides on matters relating to the granting of authorisations to HEIs based on their applications and conducts other related tasks'.

The review panel commended SAAHE on a number of aspects of its work including the progress that has been made to date with the design and implementation of its accreditation procedures, the commitment to the ESG and their incorporation within the agency's methods and procedures, the development of its own internal quality assurance arrangements, the public procedures for the selection of members of the Executive Board, the publication of the national student survey, the development of its internal information system, the emphasis on the development of internal quality assurance systems within HEIs, the comprehensive and detailed reporting of the conclusions of its review panels, the training provided for reviewers, the cooperation with the Student Council for the training of student reviewers and the policy of recruiting former student experts as review panel secretaries.

There were also areas where the panel considered that there is scope for further improvement including a review of how the issue of employability can be incorporated in the review of study programmes, the promotion of further engagement of female representatives and students within its governance structure, the further involvement of students in the development of policies and procedures, the need for further safeguards to ensure its independence, the standards for PhD programmes and the need to provide clear and accessible information about the outcomes of its accreditation activities.

Overall, the panel finds that the agency is compliant with the ESG. The judgements with regard to the individual ESG standards are as follows:

Compliant: ESG 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, and ESG 2.1,2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.7

Partially compliant: ESG 3.3 and ESG 2.6

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (Slovenská akreditačná agentúra pre vysoké školstvo, SAAHE) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted between September 2022 and September 2023. The review was conducted for the purposes of membership of ENQA and for inclusion in the EQAR.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

The agency has been an affiliate member of ENQA since March 2021.

As this is SAAHE's first external review, the panel is expected to pay particular attention to the policies, procedures, and criteria in place, being aware that full evidence of concrete results in all areas may not be available at this stage.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The scope of the review was agreed in the tripartite Terms of Reference between SAAHE, ENQA and EQAR (Annex 2).

The Quality Assurance Act (2018) sets out the Agency's list of activities in detail. In particular, its core competence is to decide on:

- the assessment of the internal quality assurance system of higher education institutions and compliance and implementation with the Standards for the Internal Systems.
- the granting of accreditation for study programmes based on an assessment of the fulfillment of the Standards for Study Programmmes
- the granting of accreditation for habilitation and/or inauguration procedures,
- the imposition of required corrective measures,
- the confirmation of state approval for applicants to operate as private higher education institutions, including the assessment of their compliance with the Standards for the Internal System and the accreditation of proposed study programmes.

The agency's consideration of habilitation and inauguration is outside the scope of the ESG and is not included within the terms of reference for the review. The review is exclusively focused on all activities which fall within the scope of the ESG.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2023 external review of SAAHE was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the external review of SAAHE was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Maria E. Weber (Chair), Head of Department of Accreditation and International Relations, Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation, Austria – quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee)

- Stephen Jackson (Secretary), Director, Assessment, Research & Evaluation Associates Ltd, UK – quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee)
- Carmen Fenoll, Professor, Universidad de Castilla-la-Mancha, Spain – academic (EUA nominee)
- Jakub Bakonyi, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland – student (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts' Pool)

Anaïs Gourdin, Senior Project Manager (ENQA) acted as the review coordinator.

Self-assessment report

In preparation for the review the agency produced a self-assessment report (SAR) detailing the agency's organisation and activities and indicating the extent to which it has addressed each of the ESG standards. The report included a brief account of the process of establishing the agency and its mission, values and principles as well as a description of the procedures and standards for its accreditation activity.

The process of developing the SAR involved a representative working group including senior members of staff and departmental heads with responsibilities for quality assurance and accreditation. The group was supported by input from a wider group of staff and benefited from feedback from higher education institutions, reviewers, employers and other stakeholders. International consultants were also invited to comment on the agency's activities. Unfortunately, although the views of students were, to some extent, recognised there was no direct input from the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions.

The report also included a SWOT analysis indicating the agency's current strengths and weaknesses, and key challenges for its future development. The analysis involved input from staff and Executive Board members and has been used for the development of the agency's strategic development plan.

The report also included links to a wide range of documents that were made available for the panel. In addition, the panel was also given a demonstration of the agency's Information System (IS SAAVŠ) which contained details about the processes related to its accreditation activities and other aspects of its operations.

The agency has benefited from its involvement in the international project *Supporting European QA agencies in meeting the ESG* (SEQA-ESG). The project involved consultations on specific topics that led to significant improvements in the agency's activities. It contributed to the SAR and to its action plan for the review.

The panel found the report to be comprehensive and informative. It provided a framework for the schedule of meetings during the review visit and gave access to sources of evidence to support the agency's analysis of its own performance. It was largely descriptive in character and some areas were lacking in detailed evaluation. Nevertheless the panel noted the information provided and were able to explore key issues with relevant representatives during the review process.

Site visit

The site visit took place between the 29th and 31st March 2023 in the agency's offices in Bratislava. In preparation for the review, a detailed schedule of meetings was agreed with the agency and appropriate representatives were invited to attend each meeting (see Appendix 1). Some representatives, not based in Slovakia, participated online. The panel had the opportunity to discuss matters in detail and to receive further information to augment the evidence in the SAR and other

documents. The schedule included meetings with the Chair of the Executive Board, the Head of Office, senior managers and staff of the agency, members of the key committees, expert members of review panels, employer and student representatives, staff from higher education institutions and the Minister of Education, Science, Research and Sport and other representatives from the Ministry. All meetings were conducted in English with the assistance of a professional interpreter.

The panel recognised the level of organisation and planning that had gone into the preparation for the visit and acknowledged the willingness of those they met to engage in discussion about the issues raised.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

At present there are 33 HEIs registered in the Slovak Republic, 20 are public institutions, three are state institutions and 10 are private institutions. In addition there are eight branch campuses of established institutions based in other countries whose activities are regulated by the legal provisions of the state in which they are located. They are authorised by the Ministry to provide higher education in the territory of the Slovak Republic. SAAHE has no role in the evaluation of their quality assurance arrangements.

In-line with the principles established by the Bologna agreement, study programmes lead to three levels of qualification, bachelor's, master's and doctoral awards. Higher education institutions offered 6,498 study programmes in 2021, 2,305 at level 6 on the National Qualifications Framework, 1,937 at level 7 and 2,256 at level 8. The sector operates within a credit framework based on the principles of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

The basic legal framework for the higher education system was established by the Higher Education Act (2002), which recognised that public higher education institutions are legal self-governing entities. Private higher education institutions are defined as business entities approved by the government for the provision of education and research. They are subject to the same quality assurance procedures as public and state institutions. The Quality Assurance Act (2018) created a legal framework for quality assurance in higher education consistent with European principles and standards. The act established SAAHE as an independent legal entity with the necessary competencies to assess the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions (institutional accreditation) and the accreditation of study programmes. It was a requirement of the act that all institutions should apply to SAAHE for the review of their internal quality systems by the end of 2022, a process that had commenced before the site visit. The agency also has a remit to evaluate requests from private organisations to operate as higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic and to assess their quality at programme and institutional level.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Quality Assurance Act (2018) created a legislative and institutional framework for quality assurance based on the ESG. Higher education institutions are expected to take responsibility for the quality of education they provide through the development and implementation of their own internal systems and procedures for quality assurance. The act also requires the agency to develop standards for study programmes and for internal quality assurance systems. Accreditation is awarded if institutions demonstrate compliance with the standards. Once approved institutions are permitted to independently establish and modify their own study programmes in the subject disciplines which are currently accredited.

SAAHE has contributed to the development of a National Action Plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic. The plan was initiated in 2020 and is one of the outcomes of the SEQA-ESG project. The plan is aimed at increasing the efficiency of the agency's activities and improving its processes to the level necessary for a functioning external quality assurance system.

The agency has identified a clear purpose and rationale for its activities which is articulated in its published vision and mission statement. Its vision states that it contributes to improving the quality of higher education, thus meeting the expectations of stakeholders and the general public, while strengthening social status and recognition and increasing the attractiveness of universities in the Slovak Republic.

Its mission is 'to contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education in the Slovak Republic by means of external quality assurance tools according to the ESG principles and in accordance with the expectations of the stakeholders involved in higher education.'

The agency seeks to realise these objectives in the conduct of its accreditation activities and more generally through its wider engagement with the higher education sector. It offers support and guidance for the development of internal processes and for the adoption of recognised academic standards. It also promotes the enhancement of quality in the provision of higher education programmes and in the learning experience of students.

SLOVAK ACCREDITATION AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
SAAHE's ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SAAHE
18 – full time, 14 – part time employees
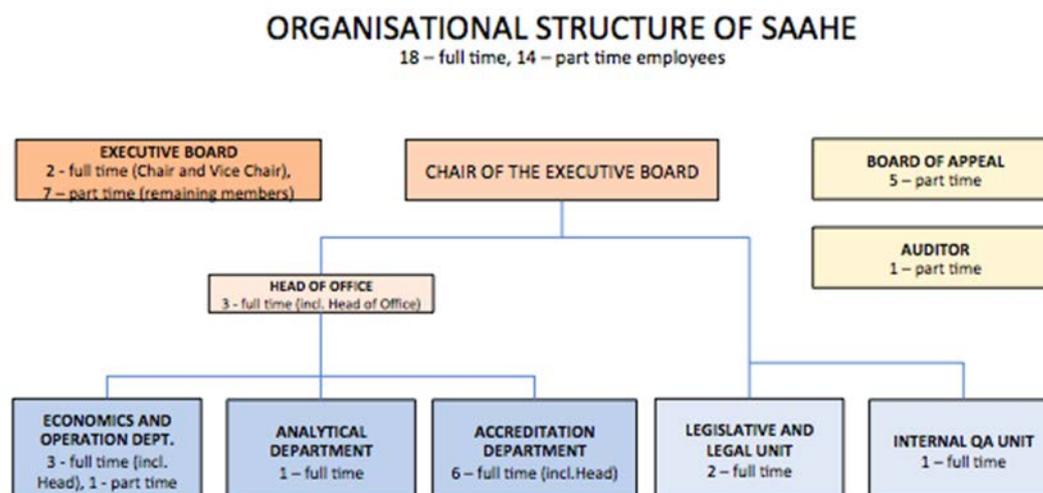
The principal members of the agency's bodies are:

Chair of the Executive Board, Vice-Chair of the Executive Board, Executive Board, Board of Appeal, Auditor (Agency Controller) and Head of Office.

The method of choice, appointment, term of office rights and obligations, remuneration and other details of the agency's bodies are defined in the Act on Quality Assurance.

The Executive Board has nine members including the Chair and Vice-Chair. The Chair and the members are appointed by the Minister. Two are proposed by the Council of Higher Education Institutions, two by the Slovak Rectors Conference (who are internationally recognised experts in the field of their activity), two are nominees of the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions and two are employers' representatives. The ninth member is the Chair. The Board is the agency's principal decision-making body. Its members act independently and are not influenced by their nominating organisations.

The Board of Appeal has five members and two alternates appointed by the Minister. Its role is to review the procedures of the Executive Board and its review panels on the basis of objections to the decisions made or to other observations of their activities.

The Auditor (Agency Controller) is also appointed by the Minister and has the responsibility of auditing the agency's management, reviewing its annual report and advising on the correction of any identified deficiencies. The role is usual for Slovak legal entities. It does not involve any formal assessment of financial matters which are the subject of a separate independent audit.

The Head of Office is appointed by the Chair of the Board and has responsibility for the functioning of the agency including administration, technical support and staffing arrangements.

The agency registered a total of 32 staff in December 2021, eight of which worked part-time. 22 other staff worked on the basis of separate contracts with the agency. The establishment plan describes five operational units: the Accreditation Department, the Analytical Department, the Economics and Operations Department, the Legislative and Legal Unit and the Internal Quality Assurance Unit. The main tasks and responsibilities of each unit are described in the agency's Organisational Rules.

SAAHE's FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

The Quality Assurance Act (2018) sets out the details of the agency's functions, activities and procedures. Its objective is to provide professional and independent perspectives on the quality of higher education in the Slovak Republic, and thereby to strengthen the quality culture in higher education institutions. Based on the Act, the decision-making authority of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic in the area of quality assurance of higher education was transferred to SAAHE as of 1 January 2020.

The principal activities within the scope of the ESG include the review of the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions, the accreditation of study programmes and institutional accreditation. It also has responsibility for granting accreditation of the habilitation and inauguration procedures and for the consideration of applications from private organisations for state approval to operate as high education institutions.

SAAHE's FUNDING

The agency's funding is defined in the Quality Assurance Act (2018) and is managed in accordance with state budget rules and procedures for public procurement. Funding is derived from the following sources:

- funds from the chapter of the Ministry of the state budget, according to the Act on the state budget for the relevant budget year, to ensure its activities
- fees from the agency's activities
- income from other business activities.

The agency keeps its funds in accounts with the State Treasury. Currently the majority of funding is derived directly from the state budget, which has remained fixed for the past two years. The agency is also permitted to raise fees from its accreditation activities in-line with an approved fee schedule. Essentially direct state funding covers the costs of running the agency. The agency's own resources, from fees, are expected to cover the costs of its accreditation activities. It is envisaged that the agency will be able to continue to achieve sustainable financial management in the future through an increase in its service provision. The agency reports on its financial position in an Annual Activity and Economy Report. Its accounts are scrutinised by the agency's auditor.

The agency has also been actively involved in a number of international initiatives including the SEQA-ESG project and the OECD project 'Improving Higher Education in the Slovak Republic'. It has close relations with the Visegrad Group of neighbouring countries (V4QA) involving shared resources and mutual exchange of information.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF SAAHE WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

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

Evidence

The review panel evaluated the details provided in the agency's self-assessment document about how it conducts its responsibilities for quality assurance and reviewed the documents that were provided in support of its submission. It also had the opportunity to discuss the agency's key activities with staff, students, employers' representatives, the Ministry and other stakeholders, and with the experts who conducted the accreditation activities as members of its review panels. The agency has produced a development strategy for 2022-2027 which translates the mission/vision into strategic objectives and a planning cycle linked to ENQA's review schedule.

The agency's principal activities are defined in the Quality Assurance Act (2018) and include the assessment of the internal systems of quality assurance within higher education institutions, the accreditation of study programmes and the evaluation of applications for state recognition from private higher education institutions. The Act has established a framework for quality assurance that is consistent with current European practice and is fully compatible with the standards defined in ESG. The agency's vision and mission statements indicate its commitment to fulfilling the requirements of the Act and of contributing to the improvement in the quality and standards of higher education in the Slovak Republic. The methods and procedures developed by the agency are based directly on the standards and guidelines in ESG, which form the basis of its procedures for institutional and programme accreditation. The agency also recognises that it has a role to provide expert and independent advice on quality assurance and the development of a quality culture within the higher education system.

The new legislative framework has established the principle that higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring the quality of education through their internal quality assurance systems. They are required to request the agency to assess their internal systems of quality once every six years. The first cycle of assessments was completed by December 2022. The agency conducts these assessments in accordance with predefined standards derived from ESG. Compliance with these standards and the implementation of appropriate quality assurance procedures authorises institutions to independently establish and modify their study programmes.

Programme accreditation is only required for new programmes in new study programme fields. It is conducted against a set of predefined standards for study programmes including linking the programme to the relevant level in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the consideration of rules

for the assessment of students and the sufficiency of learning resources. The involvement of student representatives and other stakeholders in the design and modification of the programme is also taken into consideration.

The procedures for state approval of private higher education institutions involves the application of the agency's standards and processes for the assessment of the proposed internal quality assurance system and the evaluation of proposed study programmes according to the procedures for programme accreditation. If all arrangements are compliant with the requirements the agency forwards the application to the Minister of Education for a decision on the granting of state approval.

Analysis

ESG are central to the establishment of the agency and the design and development of its systems and procedures. It has benefited significantly from its involvement in the SEQA-ESG project and the requirement to develop a comprehensive action plan to implement its recommendations. It has also benefited from the support and cooperation from the Ministry. The agency has been active in supporting institutions in the development of their own internal systems of quality assurance and has promoted the awareness of the importance of establishing and maintaining standards in education that are compliant with accepted practice across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The agency's goals are outlined in its *Development Strategy for 2022-27* which specifies its key principles (independence, transparency, integrity, cooperation/partnership, improvement) and strategic objectives (accreditation activities, international cooperation, quality culture). These inform its future intentions and assist in defining the operational aspects of the agency's activities.

In developing its action plan it has sought advice from representatives from ENQA and EQAR and engaged in discussions with a wide range of stakeholders including representatives of high education institutions, the Council of Higher Education Institutions of the Slovak Republic, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions and representatives of employers and professional associations. One key issue identified in these discussions has been the impact that the agency's activities have had on the burden of administration within higher education institutions. There is a need for review processes that are efficient and minimise the amount of additional workload. This is an issue which reflects the requirements of the current reform of the higher education system. Future developments should bring greater autonomy and flexibility for institutions.

Feedback from employers' representatives included concerns that insufficient practical training was being provided by higher education institutions and the implementation of the learning outcomes for bachelors and masters programmes was perceived to be inadequate for the revised 3+2 scheme. More could be done to prepare students for employment post graduation.

Student involvement in the Executive Board is represented by the nomination of two members of the Student Council for Higher Education Institutions. Unfortunately neither of the current student representatives is currently studying in higher education. The panel had a meeting with members of the Student Council who expressed concerns about the Council's relationship with the agency including their limited input to the development of the agency's SAR and lack of consultation over the development of the agency's methodology and standards. Moreover, the Student Council complained about the agency's attempts to influence the process of selecting student representatives to the Executive Board. The issue was also raised in a letter of support received by the Minister from the European Students' Union in March 2023. The chair of the Board has disputed these suggestions and stated his commitment to direct and immediate student participation in the agency's quality assurance processes. However, it was conceded that, due to the law, current students are not directly involved in the Executive Board. One of the two student representatives must hold a third-level university degree and have at least 15 years of academic or professional experience. A condition which effectively excludes the participation of current students.

The agency's activities are clearly grounded in the principles and practice outlined in ESG and it has had a significant influence over developments in quality assurance within the higher education sector. One of the principal challenges for the future is ensuring that the spirit and purpose of quality assurance is fully embedded within institutions and that a quality culture is developed which focuses on continuous quality enhancement in the experience of students, rather than compliance with bureaucratic procedures.

There are also issues about public awareness of developments in higher education at a time when there are concerns about the reputation of the higher education sector (OECD 2021). Institutions may take time to implement new ways of working and may not immediately appreciate the importance of accepting changes. The agency clearly has a role not only to monitor and evaluate institutions and programmes, but also to encourage and persuade institutions to adopt new ways of working. One critical aspect of this role is the publication and availability about the outcomes of the agency's accreditation activities. (see ESG 2.6 below)

Panel commendations

1 The review panel commends SAAHE on its timely implementation of all relevant aspects of ESG in the development of its procedures for accrediting institutions and programmes, with the full support of stakeholders.

Panel recommendations

1 The panel recommends that the agency should consider how the internal quality assurance systems can help to address the issue of employability in the design or review of study programmes.

2.   The panel recommends that the agency gives further consideration to the ways in which it can engage students within its governance structure and secure their involvement in the development of its policies and procedures, taking into consideration the opinion and independence of the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1 The agency is encouraged to include a focus on the enhancement of the quality of student experience as part of its procedures for accreditation.

2 The agency could consider taking further steps to reduce the administrative and bureaucratic burden of quality assurance for higher education institutions

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.2 Official status

Standard:

Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

Evidence

The official status and competence of the agency is defined in the Quality Assurance Act (2018). The Act governs 'the internal quality assurance system of higher education and its verification, establishment and status of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education and its conduct, the

granting of accreditation of the study programme and the granting of accreditation of the habilitation procedure and the procedure for the appointment of professors.' The Act introduced a legal framework for securing the quality of higher education in the public interest, based on the principles and practices outlined in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The Act has been amended three times since its adoption to clarify its expectations and to facilitate its application in practice.

The agency is formally recognised as the established quality assurance body by relevant public authorities including parliament, government, higher education institutions and their representative organisations. It is an independent public organisation overseen by an Executive Board. The Chair of the Board, appointed by the Ministry, has the responsibility to ensure the effective operation of the agency's business and its sound financial management.

Analysis

The establishment of the agency in the Quality Assurance Act (2018) ensures its official status within the legal framework for the quality of higher education. It has also given legitimacy to its procedures for the accreditation of institutions and programmes, as well as any requirements for improvement that are recommended as part of the accreditation process. The Act has established the agency as an independent public organisation that has autonomous and independent decision-making powers in the accreditation and quality assessment of higher education provision. Its remit covers public, state and private higher education institutions.

The agency has adopted an internal regulation to ensure the prevention of conflicts of interest, as required by the Act. The Chair and Deputy Chair of the Executive Board may not be employed by any higher education institution within the Slovak Republic. The regulation covers all staff engaged with the agency as well as members of review panels. The agency has also developed a code of ethics and professional conduct which sets out ethical standards, moral principles and rules of conduct for all involved with the agency's activities.

The panel acknowledged that the official status of the agency was established in the appropriate legislation and that it has the authority to conduct its business with the support of the government.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard:

Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

Evidence

The independence of the agency is confirmed by its statutory status as defined in the Quality Assurance Act (2018). Its **organisational independence** is supported by the diversity of stakeholders involved in the nomination and selection of members of its governing bodies. It also has **operational independence** in defining and managing its procedures and methodologies and in the judgments resulting from its various accreditation activities. The agency's governance arrangements ensure that it is able to confirm the **independence of formal outcomes** from its review activities. The agency has its own independent financial resources that are defined in the Act. It operates within the

requirements specified for public organisations. Its annual revenue and expenditure budget is approved by the Executive Board.

Organisational independence is specifically defined by the Act. The principal decision-making body is the Executive Board. Its members are appointed and may be dismissed by the Ministry. Appointments are made following a public selection process involving representative bodies including the Council of Higher Education Institutions, The Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions and employers' representatives. Public selection procedures are also used to appoint members of the Board of Appeal, the agency's Auditor and the Head of Office. Members of the Executive Board are appointed as respected individuals and not as representatives of other organisations. They serve in an individual capacity and act independently in the proceedings of the Board.

The agency has **operational independence** in its internal management and in the definition of its own procedures and methodologies. It has full responsibility for the selection and appointment of its experts. The Executive Board approves the composition of individual review panels which involves the selection of experts from a public list of reviewers. Checks are in place to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest for individual reviewers and institutions have the right to challenge appointments on the basis of suspected bias. The final decision on the outcomes of reviews is taken by the Executive Board. Institutions have the right to submit concerns to the Board of Appeal if there are grounds to question the legitimacy of the review process.

The **independence of the formal outcomes** from the agency's review activities is assured by the Executive Board which receives detailed evaluation reports from the agency's review activities and confirms that there has been no undue third party influence on the activities of the review panels. Institutions have the opportunity to comment on evaluation reports before they are considered by the Executive Board.

Analysis

The panel recognised that the legal status of the agency ensures its ability to operate as an independent organisation with responsibility for its business arrangements and for the outcomes of its review activities.

Within the governance arrangements the Executive Board is the principal decision-making body. It has a critical role to play in the oversight of the agency's operational procedures and in the decisions made about the appointment and placement of experts. It is also responsible for confirming the judgements made by review panels. In this context it is important to ensure that the membership of the Board is fully representative of all interests and reflects the social and structural characteristics of the higher education sector. One particular aspect, identified by the panel, was the issue of gender imbalance in the Board's membership, with under-representation of female members. It is appreciated that this is a matter which is not within the direct control of the agency, as the process of selection is in the hands of the representative bodies. However, there is an opportunity for the agency to commit to promoting the principle of gender equality in its governance arrangements and to seek greater involvement of female representatives in its operations.

The authority of the Minister is also an important consideration in the governance of the agency. The appointment of the Chair of the Executive Board is the responsibility of the Minister who also has the authority to dismiss the Chair, or other members of the Board, if there are any infringements of legislation or internal rules of the agency. It is also noted that funding for the agency from the Ministry is located in the State Treasury. As a public organization it is ultimately accountable to the Ministry. Although it is recognised that the role of the Ministry is critical in establishing the legitimacy and status of the agency and its organizational independence is defined in legislation, it may be helpful to consider

the establishment of further safeguards to ensure that the agency is fully independent and able to act autonomously, without undue influence from the Ministry or other public authorities.

Panel commendations

2. The review panel commends the public procedures adopted for the selection of members of the Executive Board.

Panel recommendations

3. The panel recommends that the agency gives consideration to promoting further engagement of female representatives within its governance structure.

4.   The panel recommends that the agency considers the need for any further safeguards to ensure its ability to function as a fully independent organisation.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

Evidence

The Quality Assurance Act (2018) places a requirement on the agency to develop 'an analysis of the development of the higher education system in the Slovak Republic, including an analysis of internal evaluation reports relating to internal systems'.

To date the agency has produced a number of reports on aspects of higher education development including an analysis of demographic developments, the impact of the new quality assurance system, the findings of the national student satisfaction survey and the conclusions from the first accreditation of study programmes. It has developed a plan for further thematic analyses and reports for the years 2022-25 which has been approved by the Executive Board. The plan focuses on the analysis of evaluation reports and will include examples of good practice identified by review panels. It specifies the topics that should be the subject of more detailed analysis derived from the agency's activities. The agency plans to publish two thematic reports every year for the next several years.

Analysis

The agency has a clear commitment to publish reports on higher education developments that are of value to the sector and more generally to other interested parties. As it has only been in existence for a relatively short period of time the agency is not in a position to comprehensively produce reports on the general findings of its external quality assurance activities, although plans are in place to do this in the future. One report on the accreditation of study programmes has already been completed.

The national student satisfaction survey, conducted in cooperation with the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions, has produced a wealth of valuable data on individual institutions and enabled comparisons between universities. It has also identified perceived strengths and weaknesses in the higher education system. The survey is complementary to the universities' own internal surveys.

In its self-evaluation the agency acknowledges that there is room for improvement in the area of presentation of thematic reports and the communication of results to stakeholders and the wider public. Its plans for the future will be focused on ensuring that it will foster improvement of the quality of higher education and the consolidation of the agency's role in supporting further developments.

Panel commendations

3. The review panel commends SAAHE on the conduct and publication of the national student satisfaction survey which has provided a wealth of information about the current situation in higher education.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

3. The agency may wish to give further consideration to how its reports can show developments, trends and areas of good practice and persistent difficulty in higher education provision.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

> Standard:
>
> Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

Evidence

The agency currently has sufficient resources to carry out its obligations defined in the Quality Assurance Act (2018). It is optimally staffed with qualified personnel to fulfill its commitments.

The SAR refers to 32 staff members of whom 17 are male and 15 female. Eight staff members are employed on part time contracts. In the initial period, after the establishment of the agency, there was a significant turnover in staff members, but more recently the situation has stabilised. The agency's current focus is on the development and training of staff, and on the establishment of appropriate levels of remuneration, to secure a professional and experienced body of staff. It also seeks to maximise the effectiveness of staff in managing the agency's portfolio of activities.

The agency operates from well-appointed rented office space in Central Bratislava. It has an appropriate configuration of staff offices, meeting rooms and social facilities. There is sufficient potential to allow for the anticipated future expansion of the agency.

The agency is committed to operating as a digital organisation without the use of paper records. It has developed its own information system covering all processes related to its core business. Higher education institutions are required to upload their applications and supporting materials directly into the agency's system. All stages of the procedures for accreditation are managed online with access granted to reviewers and administrators as appropriate. Evaluation reports are provided for members of the Executive Board. The agency intends to systematically improve the information system to make it more easily accessible to institutions and others involved with the agency.

The provision of public funding for the agency is defined in the Quality Assurance Act (2018). The funds are kept in accounts with the State Treasury and are reviewed annually by the Ministry appointed Auditor. The Executive Board approves the annual budget proposals and monitors expenditure. Initially the agency was totally dependent on funds from the state budget, but more recently it has

been able to develop an income stream directly from its accreditation activities. It is envisaged that over time there will be a shift from public funding towards other sources of income. The structure of the agency's budget is largely taken up by staff salaries, goods and services and the activities of review panels.

Analysis

In general terms the agency has sufficient and sustainable resources, both human and financial, to fulfil its obligations to a professional standard in accordance with its work and mission. It has invested in the professional development of its staff, implemented internal management systems and developed other sources of income to ensure that it has the capacity to maintain its standards of operation and plan for future expansion. The agency seeks to achieve security and sustainability of its resources by diversifying its sources of income and by prudent management of expenditure

The principal challenge has been to accommodate variations in the levels of demand for its services. The requirement for all institutions to go through a review of their internal systems for quality assurance by the end of 2022, created a peak of demand which tested the agency's ability to operate at maximum capacity.

The current reliance on state funding has been adequate to cover the basic day to day operational costs for the agency, but limits the possibilities for investment in infrastructure and involvement in larger scale projects.

Panel commendations

4. The review panel commends SAAHE on the development of its internal information system which supports its review activities and communications with institutions.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

> Standard:
>
> Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

Evidence

The agency's arrangements for internal quality assurance and professional conduct are detailed in its internal regulation No 1/2022, *Internal Quality Assurance System of Activities*. The document covers the internal system policies and structures together with the operational procedures and resources that are applied to the system and plans for development and improvement. It applies to all agency staff, members of collective bodies and stakeholders involved in the agency's activities. It is based on the ESG and consists of interlinked policies, structures and procedures to ensure and develop the quality of the activities carried out by the Agency in accordance with its development strategy.

The principal elements of the system include procedures for:

- the prevention of conflicts of interest
- the preservation of the integrity and ethical and moral principles of conduct of members of the Agency and its reviewers
- the activities of the Appeal Board

- the handling of complaints and whistleblowing reports

Responsibility for the oversight of the system rests with the Executive Board and the implementation of the policy is the responsibility of the internal quality assurance coordinator. The processes involve monitoring and deliberation by the Executive Board, internal discussion by staff and the collection and analysis of internal and external feedback on the agency's activities. The internal quality assurance coordinator is required to produce an annual evaluation of the internal system with proposals for improvement.

The agency promotes the principle of integrity in all its activities. All members of bodies, reviewers and staff of the agency are expected to be competent and behave in a professional and ethical manner. Particular attention is paid to avoiding compromising the integrity of review procedures as a consequence of potential conflicts of interest of members of review panels. All reviewers are required to provide a declaration of no conflict of interest and non-disclosure of information related to individual reviews. Institutions may submit objections to the composition of panels on the grounds of perceived bias of individual members. The agency has taken a number of measures to ensure the professionalism of its activities through the education and training of reviewers and the recruitment of additional international reviewers to increase the impartiality of review assessments. Internal and external feedback and internal process reviews are utilised to monitor the effectiveness of the internal system and introduce additional improvements.

Analysis

The agency recognises the importance of demonstrating that its activities are conducted with professionalism, impartiality and integrity, particularly in the context of a relatively small higher education sector where there may be shared understanding of the characteristics of individual institutions. The agency's public reputation and respect for its judgments about institutions are dependent on the understanding that its business is conducted without prejudice and with rigorous internal professional standards. The system consists of interlinked policies, structures and procedures to ensure and develop the quality of the activities carried out by the Agency in accordance with its development strategy.

The current goals of the system are to ensure full compliance of internal and external quality assurance methods with ESG and to the transition from individual study programme accreditation to institutional accreditation. The panel recognised that the system was effective in ensuring the implementation of the agency's strategic objectives and planned future activities.

The agency's internal regulation commits to regular review and improvements of its activities to ensure optimal services for universities and society. It has put in place measures to avoid potential conflicts on interest of locally recruited reviewers and appropriate procedures to allow institutions to raise any potential concerns about the composition of review panels or the conduct of reviews. The agency is also looking to recruit additional reviewers from outside Slovakia, not only to ensure greater impartiality but also to bring appropriate knowledge and experience of the operation of quality assurance procedures in other countries and to base judgements on the appreciation of established best practice.

Confirmation of the effectiveness of the agency's internal system is derived from feedback from higher education institutions, members of review panels and agency staff. In its self-evaluation report (SAR) the agency recognises that there is a need to improve the feedback system to focus on linking the monitoring of the work of the review panels to the reliability and integrity of the review outcomes.

Panel commendations

5. The review panel commends SAAHE on the setting-up of its internal quality management system and its function in assisting the delivery of the agency's development strategy.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

4. The panel affirms the agency's intention to increase the involvement of international reviewers in its review activities.

5. The panel supports the agency's intention to improve the feedback system linking the monitoring of the work of review panels to the reliability and integrity of review outcomes.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Standard:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

Evidence

The Agency was established by the Quality Assurance Act (2018) and has been in operation for four years. The Act requires the agency to apply for membership of ENQA and inclusion in the EQAR. The current review is the first external evaluation of the agency. Both the act and the agency's internal quality assurance system, require an external evaluation of the agency's internal system and its activities every five years.

Analysis

The agency has demonstrated its commitment to undergo an independent external review at least once every five years to confirm its adherence to the standards specified in the ESG.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

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

Evidence

The Quality Assurance Act (2018) and the agency's procedures for institutional and programme accreditation, are based on the ESG. The standards for external quality assurance are incorporated directly within the Act. The agency's intention is not only to develop systems and procedures which provide public assurance about the quality and standards of higher education provision, but also to

align the arrangements in Slovakia more closely with the accepted best practice that applies across the EHEA.

The agency has published its *Standards for the Internal Quality Assurance System* and *Standards for Study Programmes* which offer guidance to institutions for the development of their internal quality assurance systems and the development of programmes. They also provide advice on the interpretation of standards for reviewers conducting accreditation activities. The standards not only cover ESG part 1, but also include relevant regulations that are included in the Quality Assurance Act and related legislation.

Compliance of SAAHE standards with ESG

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance ESG part 1.	Standards for the Higher Education Internal Quality Assurance system	Standards for Study Programmes
1.1 Quality Assurance Policy	Article 2 Quality assurance policies In its strategic management, the higher education institution shall consistently apply the quality assurance policies. Their basic principle is to accept the primary responsibility of the institution for the quality of education provided at all parts, all levels and in all aspects of the higher education institution.	Article 1 Standards for Study Programmes The Standards serve to evaluate the compliance of an institution's internal system with the Standards for the Higher Education Internal Quality Assurance System.

1.2 Design and approval of programmes	Article 3 Design, modification and approval of study programme 'The institution has formalized structures and processes for the design, modification and approval of study programmes. The competence, extent and responsibilities of the individual structures, staff and other stakeholders for ensuring the quality of the study programme are defined.'	Article 2 Proposal and modification of study programme Article 3 Approval of study programme 'The proposal of a new study programme or the modification of a study programme is elaborated and submitted in accordance with the formalized processes of the higher education internal quality assurance system. The review and approval of a study programme involving students, employers and other stakeholders are guaranteed to be independent, unbiased, objective, professional, transparent and fair.'
1.3 Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment	Article 4 Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment 'The policies, structures and processes of the internal system shall ensure that: a) students are encouraged to take an active, autonomous, creative and independent role in their education and the learning process.'	Article 4 Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment 'The rules, forms and methods of teaching, learning and student assessment within a study programme enable the achievement of learning outcomes while respecting the diversity of the students and their needs.'

1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	Article 5 Student admission, progression, recognition and awarding of academic degrees 'The policies, structures and processes of the internal system shall ensure that institutions consistently apply pre-defined, published and easily accessible regulations covering all stages of the study cycle, e.g. student admission, progression, assessment, recognition of education, study completion, awarding of academic degrees, diplomas and any other evidence of formal qualifications.'	Article 5 Student admission, progression, recognition and awarding of academic degrees 'A study programme is delivered according to pre-defined and easily accessible rules of study at all stages of the study cycle, e.g. student admission, progression and assessment, recognition of education, certification, awarding of academic degrees, diplomas and any other evidence of formal qualifications. The specificities of special needs of students are taken into consideration.'
1.5 Teaching staff	Article 6 Teaching staff 'The policies, structures and processes of the internal system shall ensure that a transparent, objective and well-founded process for the selection of the teaching staff is implemented and that the criteria of the institution for filling the teaching staff positions are available in advance and follow the mission, long-term plan and generally binding regulations of the institution.'	Article 6 Teaching staff Article 7 Research, artistic and other activities of higher education institutions 'The institution has a sufficient number of teaching staff with the required qualifications, workload allocation, research, artistic and other activities, practical skills, teaching skills and transferable skills that enable them to achieve learning outcomes, and whose language competencies correspond to the language requirements of the study programme.' 'Teachers providing profile courses within a study programme demonstrate the outputs of their research, artistic and other activities in the relevant field(s) of study.'

1.6 Learning resources and student support	Article 7 Learning resources and student support.	Article 8 Learning resources and student support.
	'The policies, structures and processes of the internal system shall ensure that the institution has sufficient financial resources allocated to the comprehensive provision of study programmes and the related research, artistic and other activities, supportive activities and other activities corresponding to its mission.'	'The institution has sufficient spatial, material, technical and information resources for a study programme to ensure the achievement of learning objectives and learning outcomes.'
1.7 Information management	Article 8 Information management.	Article 9 Information management on the study programme.
	'The policies, structures and processes of the internal system shall ensure that information used in the effective strategic, tactical and operational management of the delivery and development of study programmes, research, artistic and other activities and other related activities of the institution is systematically collected, processed, analysed and evaluated.'	'The institution collects, analyses and makes use of relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.'

1.8 Public information	Article 9 Public information.	Article 10 Public information on the study programme.
	'The policies, structures and processes of the internal system shall ensure that the institution provides clear, precise, adequate and up-to-date quantitative and qualitative information on study programmes and their graduates as well as on other related activities in accordance with the mission of the institution that are relevant to the applicants, students, employees, employers and other external stakeholders and the public'.	'Institutions provide accessible and clearly structured information about a study programme, including intended learning objectives and learning outcomes, requirements for applicants, selection criteria and assessment procedures.'
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Article 10 On-going monitoring and periodic review and approval of study programmes.	Article 11 On-going monitoring and periodic review and approval of study programmes.
	'The policies, structures and processes of the internal system shall ensure the on-going monitoring, periodic review and periodic approval of study programmes involving employers, students and other stakeholders.'	'The institution regularly monitors, reviews and appropriately modifies a study programme in order to comply with the Standards to ensure that the learning objectives and learning outcomes are in line with the needs of students, employers, other stakeholders.'
1.10 Periodic external quality assurance	Article 11 Periodic external quality assurance.	Article 11 On-going monitoring and periodic review and approval of study programmes
	'The higher education institution undergoes a periodic external quality assurance review in order to ensure that the internal system is being developed and implemented in line with the Standards for the Internal System.'	'The study programme is periodically approved in compliance with the formalized processes of the internal system at a period corresponding to its standard length of study.'

The agency implements the same criteria for the standards of Internal quality assurance system and standards for study programmes, based on ESG Part1, for the State approval of private higher education institutions.

Analysis

The agency is committed to ensuring full compliance of the internal systems of Slovak higher education institutions and their implementation with the quality assurance framework of the EHEA. It has made it clear that it believes that higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for the quality and standards of their study programmes and for the experience of students.

Scrutiny of the evaluation reports for the accreditation of study programmes confirmed that the review panels assessed the information provided in accordance with the requirements of the agency's standards. The reports contained a very detailed account of the evaluation of each standard including evidence of good practice and deficiencies, and recommendations for improvement. They also included statements about the overall level of compliance. There was a concluding judgement about the extent to which the study programmes met the standards set by the agency.

In addition to the guidance provided for the national standards of internal quality assurance systems and standards for study programmes, the agency has also updated the procedures, criteria and indicators for external quality assurance in its published *Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards*. This establishes the rules by which the review panels and the staff of the agency evaluate the fulfilment of the standards and measures to ensure compliance with the ESG.

The panel recognised that the agency is engaged in supporting a transformation of both internal and external quality assurance systems across the higher education sector to ensure alignment with established international practice. It is continuing to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of internal quality assurance systems and will seek to optimise its processes to increase the effectiveness and reliability of external quality assurance procedures.

The panel confirmed that the agency has based the development of its standards on the requirements for internal quality assurance as defined in ESG part 1.

Panel commendations

6.   The review panel commends SAAHE for its emphasis on the development of internal quality systems rather than taking a simple checklist approach.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

6.   The review panel suggests that SAAHE should consider further refinement of its process, where possible, to reduce the administrative load on institutions.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

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

Evidence

The agency sets out its procedures for the conduct of its review activities in a published *Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards*.

The agency's has developed a common structure for the conduct of its review activities which involves four principal stages: the evaluation of an institution's self-assessment report, an on-site visit by a review panel including consultation with stakeholders, the compilation of an evaluation report and a decision on the application by the Executive Board (see ESG 2.3 below). *The Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards* includes a set of procedures, criteria and indicators that are used to evaluate the compliance of institutions and study programmes with the agency's standards and associated requirements. It addresses all aspects of ESG part 1 as well as research, artistic pursuits and other activities of higher education institutions. The standards also relate to areas that are relevant to the specifics of higher education provision in Slovakia, including habilitation and inaugural proceedings.

The development of the standards and procedures was assisted by discussions with experienced local and international reviewers and other experts in external quality assurance. The agency also involved a wide range of stakeholders including representatives of higher education institutions, the Student Council for Higher Education, employers associations, the Alliance of Sector Councils, the Slovak Rectors' Conference and other relevant bodies. It has also involved the Ministry in discussions about the proposed methodology. In addition, the agency has drawn on its involvement with the SEQA-ESG project and the knowledge of established practice in other European countries.

The methodology also includes a set of criteria which may be used in the review process to assess specific requirements of individual standards and indicators which may be used to monitor the development and improvement of particular aspects of the internal system or study programme. The methodology is updated on a regular basis in response to feedback from all those involved in the process.

With regard to the agency's remit for State approval for private higher education institutions, the agency's self-assessment report states that the same standards and procedures for internal systems and the standards for study programmes will be applied. Plans are in place for the assessment of applications which will involve the conduct of combined institutional and programme assessment. The procedure will involve the submission of a statement to the Government of the Slovak Republic for a decision on granting state approval. To date, the agency has not been required to conduct any reviews of applicant institutions.

Analysis

The panel reviewed the documentation provided by the agency about its methodology for evaluation of standards and discussed arrangements with representatives from higher education institutions and employers. There was a general recognition in the agency of the need for a more structured approach to the evaluation of quality and standards and the importance of adopting the ESG as the basis of legislation. The developments have required institutions to invest in new systems of quality assurance. They have made a case for smart review processes with as little additional workload as possible and suggested a reduction in the volume of non-standard documents supplied as evidence of their performance. The delegation of authority to accredited institutions, to independently establish and modify their own study programmes, should bring some reduction in the external requirements for documentation.

The agency's published methodology for the evaluation of its standards is comprehensive and detailed. It is intended to ensure that all institutions are able to fulfil the expectations of higher education provision in Slovakia and promote practice which is comparable to established European standards. Monitoring and feedback have identified areas where the evaluation procedures could be improved

including increasing the efficiency in the processing of applications, managing the work of review panels, the processing of evaluation reports and addressing the needs of international reviewers.

The agency recognises that there are other aspects of internal quality assurance that are not currently included in the evaluation process including verification of corrective actions, evaluations of applications for state approval, evaluation of joint study programmes and the status and evaluation of micro-credentials. The panel also found that the programme standards may not fully address the needs for PhD programmes, particularly with regard to the monitoring and support for research students.

The review panel concluded that overall the procedures and standards developed by SAAHE have been designed appropriately to meet the agency's aims and objectives, and are fit for purpose. The first round of reviews have necessarily been focused on the review of internal quality assurance systems. There is an opportunity with subsequent rounds of institutional reviews to focus more on evidence of continuing quality enhancement.

Panel recommendations

5. The panel recommends that the agency gives further consideration to the application of its methodology to PhD programmes.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

7. The panel endorses the agency's intention to update its methodology on a regular basis and to consider other aspects of internal quality assurance in the evaluation process, particularly with regard to the verification of corrective actions.

8. With regard to the State approval of private higher education institutions the agency should consider providing a statement to indicate how Part 1 of the ESG will be covered in the assessment of applications.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard:

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

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

Evidence

The agency publishes all relevant information about its quality assurance processes on its website, including the *Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards*. This applies to all its activities. Its procedures follow very closely the guidance provided in the ESG, with the initial requirement for a self-assessment report and supporting documentation followed by a site visit from a panel of experts, a report based on the evaluation of the evidence provided and monitoring of follow-up actions.

Self-assessment: in the initial stage of a review Institutions are required to provide all relevant documentation to support the review including a detailed self-assessment report which demonstrates

the extent to which each standard has been addressed. The agency provides information to support the process in its *Guide to Developing an Internal Assessment Report on Higher Education Institution Implementation of Internal Systems.*

On-site review: conducted by a review panel and involving meetings with representatives of the institution, including managers, academic staff, support staff, current students and former graduates. It also provides an opportunity for discussions with relevant stakeholders.

Reporting: at the end of the on-site review the panel produces an evaluation report summarising the findings of the review and the level of compliance of the individual standards. The report indicates areas for follow-up action and further improvement. The report is sent to the institution for comment and correction of factual errors, before submission to the Executive Board for a decision on the outcome of the review.

Follow-up action: the agency has procedures in place for follow-up activity if there are requirements for corrective actions. It also monitors the implementation of actions arising from the recommendations of the review panels. The monitoring and review of study programmes includes relevant feedback from stakeholders. At least once a year, students have an opportunity to comment on the quality of teaching and the teachers of the study programme in an anonymous questionnaire. The agency has the responsibility to assess compliance of the implementation of a study programme after two years of the first graduate from the programme. Given the recent implementation of the review methodology, monitoring and follow-up activity is yet to be completed.

The self-assessment process involves an evaluation of the institution's procedures for ensuring that study programmes meet the internal quality assurance requirements. Evidence is also provided to demonstrate that the submission complies with the standards for the study programme. Based on the materials provided, review panels assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the institution and identify areas for further consideration. Following the completion of the review the agency gathers feedback from reviewers, agency staff and the institution to evaluate the effectiveness of the process.

To date the agency's activity has used this methodology for the accreditation of new study programmes. It is currently in the process of reviewing institutions' quality systems using the same basic methodology. The awarding of institutional accreditation, resulting from this process, will authorise institutions to independently establish and modify their own study programmes.

The panel analysed the information provided in a sample of evaluation reports. The reports indicated that the review teams (referred to as working parties) conducted an in-depth evaluation of the applications which involved the detailed consideration of the self-assessment report and supporting documents and an extensive set of discussions with staff, students and other stakeholders. The reports include an assessment of each of the agency's individual standards including recommendations and a statement about compliance. They end with a concluding statement based on the agreement between the members of the team.

Analysis

The panel analysed the information provided in a sample of evaluation reports. The reports indicated that the review teams (referred to as working parties) conducted an in-depth evaluation of the applications which involved the detailed consideration of the self-assessment report and supporting documents and an extensive set of discussions with staff, students and other stakeholders. The reports include an assessment of each of the agency's individual standards including recommendations and a statement about compliance. They end with a concluding statement based on the agreement between the members of the team.

The panel learned from the discussions with agency staff and reviewers that all steps in the process are outlined in detail in the manual, that the agency has been very thorough in setting up the procedures and ensuring that they are in line with this ESG and the legal framework. The agency has also developed several training opportunities and presentations on new ways of conducting external quality assurance and for coping with the challenges during covid period.

The role of the Executive Board as the independent decision making body for the outcome of reviews is a significant development. Previously the Ministry had been responsible for accreditation decisions. The Board has taken steps to ensure that all information from reviews is fully considered and that the judgments on the individual standards are appropriately supported by the evidence.

In the relatively short period of implementation of the new quality assurance system the agency has made every effort to ensure efficiency and consistency in the delivery of its operations. On the basis of the evidence provided in the reports and from discussions with reviewers and representatives of higher education institutions the panel concluded that the agency's external quality assurance processes are fit for purpose and appropriate for the system requirements. They are also effectively delivered and implemented consistently.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

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

Evidence

All of the agency's quality assurance processes are conducted with the involvement of external experts including national and international academic experts, employer representatives and students. Reviews for the accreditation of study programmes typically involve five experts as members of the review panel.   Panels include national and international academic experts, employers and student representatives. Institutional reviews may require larger panels to cover the range of faculties and study fields. The agency expects that up to 30 experts maybe engaged in the reviews of the largest HEIs.

The agency maintains a list of reviewers that have been appointed initially following open calls for interested experts, but more recently by targeted invitations for relevant applicants. At the time of compiling the agency's SAR the agency had 1,522 persons on the list of reviewers of which 411 were international reviewers, 312 professional experts, 115 students and 78 reviewers qualified to assess the internal systems of higher education institutions.

Prospective reviewers go through an extensive process to evaluate their suitability to act as representatives of the agency and to prepare them for engagement with institutions. The details of the process are included in agency documentation about the principles for the registration in the list of reviewers. Applicants are assessed for their independence and impartiality to ensure there are no conflicts of interest. Reviewers are selected on the basis of their work and professional experience. Students are selected based on their field of study. Approval of candidates is confirmed by the Executive Board.

Once appointed, reviewers are provided with training in the agency's review procedures and the ESG. They are also briefed on the information system. The composition of review panels is based on experience of internal quality assurance systems and the fields of study for programme accreditation. Each panel is established to manage the requirements of the review. In addition to experts from local HEIs, panels include an international reviewer and a student reviewer and if necessary, may include experts from professional areas or experience of internal quality management.

The chairs of review panels receive additional training on their role and responsibilities. Review panels are also briefed on the particular circumstances of each review before visiting institutions.

Analysis

The panel met with a representative group of existing reviewers from Slovakia and a separate group of international reviewers. Both groups confirmed that they had been approached to apply for the role and that the appointment process was well organised. They also confirmed that they had received extensive training for their roles and that the agency provided continuing support for their preparation and for the conduct of reviews.

Reviewers commented that they have the opportunity to offer feedback on the review procedures and the challenges associated with their engagement with institutions. Comments included the difficulty of aligning the standards and criteria to individual subjects and the appropriateness of the standards for PhD programmes. They also raised the challenge of needing to gain consensus on each individual standard and the potential lack of consistency between review panels. Both groups confirmed that the experience of reviewing was informative and beneficial.

The agency ensures that individual panels include the participation of international reviewers, students and employers' representatives. It is looking to increase the involvement of international reviewers, mainly from the Czech Republic, to enhance the impartiality of panels and provide experience of European practice in quality assurance.

The panel learned during the site visit that student reviewers receive additional assistance in preparation for reviews including access to learning materials and in-person consultations. The Student Council has provided assistance in the training of student reviewers through its well-received training project. Once they have completed their term as a student reviewer a number have been invited to join panels as review secretaries.

The panel recognised the significance that the agency has attached to the important role played by its experts and the steps that have been taken to ensure their training and preparation. The procedures for recruitment and appointment of new reviewers are well documented and promote high professional standards in the conduct of reviews. Particular attention is given to supporting student reviewers. They are treated as equal members of the review panels, with the same rights and duties.

Panel commendations

7. The review panel commends the agency for its training and preparation of reviewers for their role in conducting visits to institutions and evaluating the compliance with the standards for study programmes.

8. The panel also commends the cooperation with the Student Council in the training of student reviewers and the policy of recruiting review panel secretaries from among former student experts.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

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

Evidence

The agency's *Methodology for the evaluation of standards* sets out a set of procedures, criteria and indicators that are used by review panels to assess the compliance of institutions and study programmes with the agency's established standards and with the ESG. Verification of the outcomes of reviews is confirmed by the consideration and approval of all evaluation reports by the Executive Board.

The agency has organised events for representatives of higher education institutions to explain its methodology and the purpose of the standards. The interpretation of the evaluation criteria is also part of the training of members of the review panels. The agency takes steps to ensure the consistency of the application of standards by having a staff member of the Accreditation Department assigned for the oversight of each review and assisting the Chair in ensuring that there is correct and consistent interpretation of the standards. Standard templates for documents relating to reviewing compliance with the standards are also used.

Analysis

The outcomes or judgements made by the Executive Board, as a result of reviews of institutions and study programmes, are evidence based and dependent on explicit and published criteria. The agency addresses consistency of outcomes through the training of reviewers, the oversight of the review process by members of the Accreditation Department, the use of a standard template for reports and by the final assessment and approval of the outcomes of reviews by the Executive Board. Institutions have a right of appeal if they are concerned that the agency's procedures have not been appropriately conducted.

The agency has collected feedback on the experience of the first study programmes reviews from different stakeholders involved in the process that, together with recent amendments in the Higher Education Act, has resulted in modifications to the methods for the evaluation of standards. However, the agency notes in its SWOT analysis that inconsistencies in some of the evaluation reports of the review panels, including discrepancies between the findings and conclusions, is an issue which requires further attention.

The panel concluded that the outcomes of the agency's accreditation activities are evidence based and dependent on explicit and published criteria that are applied impartially and consistently in accordance with the published standards The panel noted that the agency is seeking to further improve the consistency of reporting to the Executive Board.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

9. The panel encourages SAAHE to give further consideration to the procedure for ensuring the consistency of outcomes from different review panels.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.6 Reporting

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

Evidence

It is a requirement of the Quality Assurance Act that the agency should publish on its website all the evaluation reports of the review panels. It should also publish the formal decisions taken by the Executive Board on the outcomes of each review. The evaluation reports include details about previous evaluation procedures, the documents provided by the institutions, the conduct of the site visit and the evaluation and assessment of the individual standards. They also include recommendations for improvement and comments on examples of good practice.

Analysis

Consideration of the sample of evaluation reports provided confirmed that they give an account of the work of the review teams and the detail of compliance with individual standards. They are essentially working documents to meet the operational requirements of the agency's procedures and consequently are detailed and technical. They are not explicitly designed to meet the expectations of providing information to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals on the quality of higher education institutions and their study programmes. Initial feedback on the content of reports, from the members of review panels, higher education institutions and other stakeholders, have identified comments and suggestions for modifying the reports.

Despite the agency's statement in its SAR that it publishes the full applications of institutions, the evaluation reports of the review panels, the documents for decisions and the formal decisions of the agency, a search of the agency's website did not identify any clear links to these documents. They are not currently listed either under the sections dealing with the accreditation process or the list of publications. The agency needs to ensure that it is in compliance with the requirement that full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals.

Panel commendations

7. The review panel commends the agency on the comprehensive and detailed reporting of the activities and conclusions of its review panels for the accreditation of study programmes.

Panel recommendations

6. The panel recommends that the agency gives further consideration to providing clear and accessible information about the outcomes of its review activity in a readily accessible format on its website.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

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

Evidence

The agency has a clearly identified and transparent process for addressing complaints and appeals which are detailed in its internal regulations. The *Directive on the Handling of Complaints* and the *Rules of Procedure of the Board of Appeal* are both available on the agency's website. It acknowledges that there is an explicit expectation that the published outcomes of its review activities are based on reliable evidence, appropriately applied criteria and consistently followed procedures. HEIs have the right to lodge complaints or appeals against the conduct of reviews or the decisions taken by the agency on the outcomes of its reviews.

The Quality Assurance Act (2018) includes provision for the establishment of the Board of Appeal to review any concerns arising from the agency's review activities. The Board consists of five members and two alternates appointed by the Minister based on a public selection procedure. The procedures for the Board's operations are detailed in the *Rules of Procedure of the Board of Appeal.* Three members of the Board are required to have qualifications in Law and the other two must have experience of at least five years as a professor or associate professor at a university.

The Board may review the decisions of the agency and evaluate whether the requirements of the Quality Assurance Act or the internal rules governing the procedures of the Executive Board and its review panels, have been fully complied with. It may refer decisions back to the Executive Board for reconsideration. It is not empowered to reverse the agency's decisions.

To date the Board has considered three appeals. Two concerning the perceived bias of a member of a review panel and one against the rejection of an application for the accreditation of a study programme. Both accusations of bias were not upheld by the Board. The appeal about the accreditation was referred back to the Executive Board for further consideration.

Analysis

The panel met with two members of the Board of Appeal one of whom had a background in legal practice and the other was based in the Faculty of Law at the University of Bratislava. They confirmed that their function was to establish whether due process had been followed in the conduct of reviews and in the process for decision-making about the judgments for the review outcomes. The Board meets as required when complaints or appeals have been lodged with the agency.

The members of the Board described the circumstances of the appeals that had been considered to date and explained the reasons for their judgments. The panel was reassured that the composition of the Board of Appeal included appropriate representation and experience and conducted its business with impartiality and understanding of the agency's procedures.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AS THE DRIVER OF CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The panel confirmed the shared commitment to good quality in higher education in Slovakia throughout all interviews. It also learned that in the short period since the Quality Act (2018) entered into force, SAAHE has developed methodologies and standards that are in line with the ESG.

Based on information provided in various meetings with the agency staff, the management and the Executive Board, as well as with all other stakeholders, the panel appreciated that the methodologies and procedures that are in place aim clearly at fostering higher education's responsibility for assuring the quality of their provisions. In addition, the discussions with all stakeholders during the site-visit indicated that the implementation of the Quality Act had brought about a significant change within higher education institutions. It has ensured that the key core commitments of quality assurance in the EHEA, such as the establishment of an independent agency and commitment towards stakeholder involvement, were embedded in the new system. In addition, key elements of the Bologna Process, such as student centered learning, have been recognised as important developments. The standards have created the necessity for re-aligning quality in higher education with the rationale of the Bologna process and its procedures. All these developments have contributed to the emergence of a new 'quality culture' within higher education.

The changes made in external quality assurance and their impact on the internal quality assurance is therefore to be seen as a consequent commitment towards the fulfillment of the Bologna Process agreements.

The panel is assured that the membership of SAAHE in ENQA and inclusion in EQAR, will support the efforts made regarding the establishment of the new system of external quality assurance in Slovakia aimed at safeguarding and fostering the continuous enhancement of the quality of the student experience. It will be a driver for a shared responsibility for the quality and standards of higher education and a commitment to a 'fit for purpose' external quality assurance system.

The panel is aware that the efforts made by the agency, in such a short period of change, will need the continuing support and commitment from all relevant stakeholders, in particular by the higher education institutions and the Ministry. The fact that the agency is at an early stage in its development means that it has yet to establish a detailed track record of all of its activities. Some procedures, such as the follow-up arrangements and the thematic analysis of outcomes from reviews, are yet to be fully implemented. Similarly, there has only been a small number of appeals on which to assess the effectiveness of the procedures.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

1. The review panel commends SAAHE on its timely implementation of all relevant aspects of ESG in the development of its procedures for accrediting institutions and programmes, with the full support of stakeholders.

ESG 3.3 Independence

2. The review panel commends the public procedures adopted for the selection of the Executive Board

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

3. The review panel commends SAAHE on the conduct and publication of the national student satisfaction survey which has provided a wealth of information about the current situation in higher education.

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

4. The review panel commends SAAHE on the development of its internal information system which supports its review activities and communications with institutions.

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

5. The review panel commends SAAHE on the setting-up of its internal quality management system and its function in assisting the delivery of the agency's development strategy

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

6. The review panel commends SAAHE for its emphasis on the development of internal quality assurance systems rather than taking a simple checklist approach.

ESG 2.4 PIER REVIEW EXPERTS

7. The review panel commends the agency for its training and preparation of reviewers for their role in conducting visits to institutions and evaluating the compliance with the standards for study programmes.

8. The panel also commends the cooperation with the Student Council in the training of student reviewers and the policy of recruiting review panel secretaries from among former student experts.

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

9. The review panel commends the agency on the comprehensive and detailed reporting of the activities and conclusions of its review panels for the accreditation of study programmes.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ESG Part 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

1. The Panel recommends that the agency should consider how the internal quality assurance systems can help to address the issue of employability in the design or review of study programmes

2. The panel recommends that the agency gives further consideration to the ways in which it can engage students within its governance structure and secure their involvement in the development of its policies and procedures, taking into consideration the opinion and independence of the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions.

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

3. The panel recommends that the agency gives consideration to promoting further engagement of female representatives within its governance structure.

4. The panel recommends that the agency considers the need for any further safeguards to ensure its ability to function as a fully independent organisation.

Panel conclusion: Partially compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 2 PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

5. The panel recommends that the agency gives further consideration to the application of its methodology to PhD programmes.

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

6. The panel recommends that the agency gives further consideration to providing clear and accessible information about the outcomes of its review activity in a readily accessible format on its website.

Panel conclusion: Partially compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Panel conclusion: Compliant

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT
 ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

1 The agency is encouraged to include a focus on the enhancement of the quality of student experience as part of its procedures for accreditation.

2   The agency should consider taking further steps to reduce the administrative and bureaucratic burden of quality assurance for higher education institutions

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

3   The agency may wish to give further consideration to how its reports can show developments, trends and areas of good practice and persistent difficulty in higher education provision.

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

4. The panel affirms the agency's intention to increase the involvement of international reviewers in its review activities.

5   The panel supports the agency's intention to improve the feedback system linking the monitoring of the work of review panels to the reliability and integrity of review outcomes

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

6. The review panel suggests that SAAHE should consider further refinements of its process, where possible, to reduce the administrative load on institutions

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

7. The panel endorses the agency's intention to update its methodology on a regular basis and to consider other aspects of internal quality assurance in the evaluation process, particularly with regard to the verification of corrective actions.

8. With regard to the State approval of private higher education institutions the agency should consider providing a statement to indicate how Part 1 of the ESG will be covered in the assessment of applications.

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

9. The panel encourages SAAHE to give further consideration to the procedure for ensuring the consistency of outcomes from different review panels.

ANNEXES

SLOVAK ACCREDITATION AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Schedule for face to face site visit 29 – 31 March 2023

SESSION No	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
		28 March 2023	
	2000-2200	**Review panel's Evening Meal and preliminary discussions about the arrangements for the site visit**	
		29 March 2023	
	09.00-10.00	**Review panel's meeting and preparations for day 1**	
1	10.00-10.30	Meeting with the agency's resource person to confirm practical arrangements	Head of Office – at disposal of the panel during the whole site visit
2	10.30-11.30	Introduction to the role of the agency, its current activities and vision for the future	Head of Office and Chair of the Executive Board • Chair of the Executive Board • Head of Office

	11.30-11.45	Review panel's private discussion	
3	11.45-12.45	Meeting with the SAAHE team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report	<u>Members of the working group excluding the Head of Office and the Chair of the Executive Board</u> • Deputy Chair of the Exec. Board • Head of Accreditation Department • Internal Quality Assurance Unit • Legislative and Legal Unit *Interpreter*
	12.45-13.30	Lunch (panel only)	
4	13.30-14.30	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team.	<u>Heads of Departments</u> • Head of Office • Head of Accreditation Dept. • Head of Analytical Dept. • Head of Economics and Operation Dept. • Legislative and Legal Unit *Interpreter*

	14.30-14.45	Review panel's private discussion	
5	14.45-15.45	Meeting with key staff of the agency/staff in charge of external QA activities.	Accreditation Department excluding the Head of Department *Interpreter*
	15.45-1600	Review panel's private discussion	
6	1600-17.00	Meeting with members of the Executive Board **https://saavs.sk/en/members-of-the-executive-board/**	Excluding the Chair. Maximum of 6 members *Interpreter*
	17.00-17.45	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2.	

		30 March 2023	
	08.45-09.10	Review panel's private meeting to consider the agenda for day 2.	
	09.10-09.30	Agency information system presentation	• Head of Accreditation Dept.
7	09.45-10.30	Meeting with the Board of Appeal.	• Law firm Roman Olexik, Ltd. – advocate • Faculty of Law, Comenius University Bratislava *Interpreter*
	10.30-10.45	Review panel's private meeting	
8	10.45-11.45	Meeting with the Auditor and members of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit and the Legislative and Legal Unit.	• Auditor • Internal Quality Assurance Unit • Legislative and Legal Unit • Legislative and Legal Unit *Interpreter*

	11.45-12.00	Review panel's private discussion	
9	12.00-13.00	Meeting with Peer review experts based in Slovakia, including professional experts and student experts.	- Comenius University in Bratislava, Jessenius Faculty of Medicine – expert reviewer in study programmes accreditation of University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava - Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Faculty of Medicine – expert reviewer in study programmes accreditation of Comenius University Bratislava - Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Arts – expert reviewer in study programmes accreditation of Matej Bel University - employers' representative from Business Environment Section of the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic - reviewer in study programmes accreditation of University of Prešov - student reviewer in University of Prešov and University of Economics in Bratislava - student reviewer in study programmes accreditation of University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava *Interpreter*

	13.00-14.00	Lunch (panel only)	
10	14.00-1500	Meeting with international experts.	ONLINE MEETING • USA, California, University of Redlands - reviewer in study programmes accreditation of University of Prešov • Czech Republic, Czech Technical Univ., Faculty of Nuclear Sciences and Physical Engineering - reviewer in study programmes accreditation of Comenius University in Bratislava • Finland, University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Education - reviewer in study programmes accreditation of J. Selye University in Komárno • Czech Republic, Brno University of Technology, Faculty of Information Technology - reviewer in study programmes accreditation of Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava • UK, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick - reviewer in study programmes accreditation of University of Economics in Bratislava
	15.00-15.15	Review panel's private discussion	

11	15.15-16.15	Meeting with representatives from Higher Education Institutions.	- Vice President of the Slovak Rector's Conference, rector of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra - Chair of the Council of Higher Education Institutions - Vice Rector of University of Economics in Bratislava, in charge of QA – public HEI - Rector of VŠM City University – private HEI - Vice Rector of Technical University of Košice, in charge of QA – public HEI *Interpreter*
	16.15-16.30	Review panel's private discussion	
12a	16.30-17.15	Meeting with key stakeholders – employers.	- First Vice President of the Union of Employers - Alliance of Sector Councils, - Chair of the Slovak Academy of Sciences *Interpreter*

12b	17.15-18.00	Meeting with key stakeholders - students.	• Chair of the Student Council for Higher Education • Vice Chair of the Student Council for Higher Education • Vice Chair of the Student Council for Higher Education
	18.00-18.15	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions.	
		31 March 2023	
	09.00-09.30	Private meeting between panel members to review the agenda for day 3 and agree on the final issues for clarification.	

13	09.30-10.30	Meeting with representatives from the national authorities including the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.	- Minister - Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic in charge of Science, Research and Higher Education - State Secretary - Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic in charge of Science, Research and Higher Education - Director General of Higher Education Section – Ministry of Education - Director of Higher Education Department – Ministry of Education - Member of Parliament of National Council of the Slovak Republic, Chair of Education, Youth, Science and Sports Committee - Member of Parliament of National Council of the Slovak Republic, Vice Chair of Education, Youth, Science and Sports Committee and rector of Technical University of Alexander Dubček in Trenčín *Interpreter*
	10.30-10.45	Review panel's private discussion	

14	10.45-11.15	Meeting with the Head of Office and Head of the Accreditation Department to discuss any outstanding issues.	Head of Office Head of Accreditation Department
	11.15-12.00	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings of the review	
15	12.00 -12.30	Final de-briefing meeting to inform about preliminary findings.	Chair of the Executive Board, Deputy Chair of the Executive Board
	12.30-13.15	Lunch (panel only)	

TRIPARTITE TERMS OF REFERENCE BETWEEN SAAHE, ENQA AND EQAR
November 2022

1. Background and context

SAAHE was established as an independent legal body by the Quality Assurance Act in November 2018. The main objective of this legal change in Slovakia was the adoption of quality assurance framework in higher education, fully consistent with the European principles governing this area in Europe.

The remit of SAAHE and its structure are already determined by the Quality Assurance Act which identifies the agency's internal bodies and defines their rights, duties, and basic links. One of the initial steps of SAAHE which resulted from the Quality Assurance Act, was the preparation and publication of the Standards for the Internal System, the Standards for Study Programme, and the Methodology for their Evaluation. These documents, together with the Quality Assurance Act form the basic legal framework of SAAHE operation.

SAAHE is equipped with the necessary competencies in the field of quality assessment of higher education institutions in Slovakia. These include, in particular, the assessment of the internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution, the accreditation of study programmes, and if necessary, the imposition of corrective measures.

The mission of SAAHE is to contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education in Slovakia by means of external quality assurance tools and in accordance with the expectations of the stakeholders involved in education. SAAHE provides higher education institutions with an expert and independent view on quality of education and fosters the development of quality culture.

Since its establishment, SAAHE assessed and decided on 177 applications from higher education institutions for study programme accreditation at all three levels of higher education. Moreover, within 2020-2021, SAAHE assessed up to 154 proposals for study programme modification and granted 646 prior approvals for study programme modification.

SAAHE has been an affiliate of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since March 2021 and is applying for ENQA membership.

SAAHE is applying for inclusion on EQAR.

2. Purpose and scope of the review

This review will evaluate the extent to which SAAHE (the agency) complies with each of the standards of Parts 2 and 3 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and support the agency in its efforts to continually review and enhance its work. Such an external review is a requirement for agencies wishing to apply for ENQA membership and/or for EQAR registration.

2.1 Activities of the agency within the scope of the ESG

To apply for ENQA membership and EQAR registration, this review will analyse all of the agency's activities that fall within the scope of the ESG, e.g., reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditations of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). All activities are reviewed irrespective of geographic scope (within or outside the EHEA) or whether they are obligatory or voluntary in nature.

The following activities of the agency must be addressed in the external review:

- Institutional accreditation (Assessment of the higher education institution's internal system compliance and implementation with the Standards for the Internal System),

- Programme accreditation (Proceeding conducted at the request of a higher education institution that has not yet accredited a study programme in the relevant field of study and degree - an initial accreditation of a study programme, or joint study programme, which is conducted based on an assessment of the fulfillment of the Standards for Study Programme),

- State approval proceeding (Proceeding at the request of a legal entity wishing to operate as a private higher education institution. In this proceeding, the Agency assesses whether the proposed internal system of the private higher education institution complies with the Standards for the Internal System and accredits the proposed study programmes).

While some activities (i.e. state approval proceeding) are not yet carried out, the activities should nevertheless be covered and assessed in the self-evaluation report and external review on the basis of available processes and documentation.

The accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings is outside of the scope of the ESG and not relevant for the application for inclusion on EQAR.

Should any substantive changes occur in SAAHE between now and the review (e.g. organisational changes, the introduction or changes of activities within or outside of the scope of the ESG), the agency should inform EQAR at its earliest convenience.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted following the methodology of ENQA Agency Reviews. The process is designed in line with the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The review procedure consists of the following steps:
- Formulation of, and agreement on the Terms of Reference for the review between SAAHE, ENQA and EQAR (including publishing of the Terms of Reference on ENQA's website[1]);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;

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[1] The agency is encouraged to publish the ToR on its website as well.

- Notification of EQAR about the appointed panel;
- Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit of the agency by the review panel;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Publication of the final review report;
- A decision from the EQAR Register Committee on the agency's registration on EQAR;
- A decision from the ENQA Board on ENQA membership;
- Follow-up on the panel's recommendations to the agency, including a voluntary progress visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review panel

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts (at least one of which is currently employed by an ENQA member agency), an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member, and potentially a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews at least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

3.2 Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

The agency is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and must adhere to the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is expected to contain:
  - a brief description of the HE and QA system;
  - the history, profile, and activities of the agency;

- a presentation of how the agency addresses each individual standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG for each of the agency's external QA activities, with a brief, critical reflection on the presented facts;
- opinions of stakeholders;
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- reference to the recommendations provided in the previous review and actions taken to meet those recommendations;
- a SWOT analysis;
- reflections on the agency's key challenges and areas for future development.
- All the agency's external QA activities (as defined under section 2.1) are described and their compliance with the ESG is analysed in the SAR.
- The report is well-structured, concise, and comprehensive. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which the agency performs its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.3 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule which must be submitted to the agency at least six weeks before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule is to include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is usually 2,5 days. The approved schedule must be given to the agency at least one month before the site visit to properly organise the requested interviews.

In advance of the site visit (ideally at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:
- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

The review panel will be assisted by the ENQA Review Coordinator during the site visit. The review coordinator will act as the panel's chief liaison with the agency, monitor the integrity of the review process and its consistency, and ensure that ENQA's overall expectations of the review are considered and met.

The site visit will close with a final debriefing meeting in which the panel outlines its general impressions and provides an overview of the judgement on the agency's ESG compliance. The

panel will not comment on whether or not the agency would be granted/reconfirmed membership with ENQA or registration on EQAR.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final review report

Based on the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will follow the purpose and scope of the review as defined under sections 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for the panel's findings concerning each standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind *EQAR's Policy on Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies*[2] to ensure that the report contains sufficient information for the Register Committee to consider the agency's application for registration on EQAR.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language, and it will then be submitted to the agency – usually within 10 weeks of the site visit – for comment on factual accuracy and grave misunderstandings only. The agency will be given two weeks to do this and should not submit any additional material or documentation at this stage. Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the agency's feedback on possible factual errors and finalise and submit the review report to ENQA.

The report should be finalised within three months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 40-50 pages in length.

3.5. Publication of the report and a follow-up process

The agency will receive the review panel's report and publish it on its website once the Agency Review Committee has validated the report. The report will also be published on the ENQA website together with the statement of the Agency Review Committee validating external review reports by assessing the integrity of the review process and checking the quality and consistency of the reports. Importantly, during this process, and prior to final validation of the report, the Agency Review Committee has the option to request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome.

As part of the review's follow-up activities, the agency commits to react on the review recommendations and submit a follow-up report to ENQA within two years of the validation of the final external review report. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website.

The follow-up report may be complemented by an optional progress visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). The visit, which normally takes place 2-3 years after the verification of the final external review report (and after submission of the follow-up report), aims to offer an enhancement-oriented and strategically driven dialogue that ordinarily might be difficult to truly integrate in the compliance-focused site visit. The progress visit thus does not have the objective of checking the agency's ESG compliance or how the agency has followed up on the recommendations,

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[2] Available at: https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg

but rather provides an arena for strategic conversations that allow the agency to reflect on its key challenges, opportunities, and priorities. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

4. Use of the report

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA.

The report is used as a basis for the Register Committee's decision on the agency's registration on EQAR. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The review process is thus designed to serve two purposes. In any case, the review report should only be considered final after validation by the Agency Review Committee. After submission to ENQA but before validation by the ARC, the report may not be used or relied upon by the agency, the panel, or any third party and may not be disclosed without ENQA's prior written consent. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on EQAR registration or ENQA membership.

For the purposes of EQAR registration, the agency will submit the review report (once validated by the Agency Review Committee) to EQAR via email. The agency should also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), a Declaration of Honour, and any other documents that may be relevant for the application (i.e., annexes, statement to the review report, updates). EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting as stipulated in the indicative review schedule below and before the decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

5. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	September 2022
Appointment of review panel members	October/November 2022
Self-assessment completed	15 November 2022
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	November 2022
Preparation of the site visit schedule and indicative timetable	December 2022/ January 2023
Briefing of review panel members	December 2022
Review panel site visit	March 2023

Draft of review report and its submission to ENQA Review Coordinator for verification of its compliance with the Guidelines	May 2023
Draft of review report to be sent for a factual check to the agency	May 2023
Agency statement on the draft report to the review panel (if necessary)	June 2023
Submission of the final report to ENQA	July 2023
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	September 2023
Publication of report	September 2023
EQAR Register Committee meeting and initial consideration	Autumn 2023
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	October 2023

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

EHEA   European Higher Education Area
ENQA   European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG   *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2015
HE   higher education
HEI   higher education institution
Ministry   Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic
NQF   National Qualifications Framework
OECD   Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QA   quality assurance
SAR   self-assessment report
SAAHE   Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education
V4QA   Visegrad Group for Quality Assurance

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY SAAHE

Action plan for the external review of SAAHE

Amendments to the Law on Universities (2022)

Annual activity and economy report of SAAHE in 2021

Amendments to the methodology for the evaluation of standards

Changes if higher education as a result of the implementation of QA systems for 2019-2021

Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct

Conflict of Interest Regulation

Development Strategy of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education for the years 2022-2027

Directive on the processing of complaints

Directive on remuneration of members of review panels

Directive on the internal system of verification of notification of anti-social activities

Evaluation of the internal system of Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education for the year 2022

Internal Labour Rules

Internal quality assurance system of activities, SAAHE

Law on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2018)

Memorandum of Understanding V4QA Forum

Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards

Mission of the Agency

National action plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic

Organisational Rules for SAAHE

Plan of thematic analyses and reports

Principles for the Registration in the List of Reviewers

Privacy Policy

Quantitative overview of demographic development in Slovak higher education for 1989-2020

Standards for the Higher Education Internal Quality Assurance System

Rules of Procedure of the Board of Appeal

Rules of Procedure for the Review Panel of the Executive Board of SAAHE

Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board

Standards for Habilitation Proceedings and Inauguration Proceedings

Standards for Study Programmes

Statute of SAAHE

Updated Action Plan for 2022-2023

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

OECD, 2021 Improving Higher Education in the Slovak Republic, OECD Publishing, Paris

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Brussels, Belgium

ENQA AGENCY
REVIEW 2023

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review of
the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE),
undertaken in 2023.

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