

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW

**SLOVENIAN
QUALITY
ASSURANCE
AGENCY
FOR HIGHER
EDUCATION
(SQAA)**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the analysis and conclusions of the ENQA review of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG 2015) Part 2 and 3 (as relevant following the agreed Terms of Reference). The report is based on an ENQA targeted peer review, following the methodology described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews and considering the *Use and Interpretation of the ESG* by the EQAR's Register Committee. In addition to the agency and its stakeholders, the report is meant to provide information for the ENQA Board's decision on SQAA's renewal of membership and to EQAR to support the agency's reapplication to the register.

The review took place from July 2022 to December 2023, with the in-person site visit on 22nd – 24th March 2023.

SQAA is a national-level QA agency. It conducts evaluation and accreditation of higher education (HE) study programmes and institutions that are a requirement for institutions to operate within Slovenia. In addition, it conducts the evaluation of vocational colleges. Furthermore, it strives to enhance the HE system's quality by engaging with HE stakeholders, conducting various studies to support the sector, and cooperating with agencies abroad.

This report addresses the ESG standards where SQAA was judged as partially compliant by the EQAR Register Committee during the previous full review, namely ESGs 2.6 (Reporting), 3.4 (Thematic analysis) and 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct).

In addition, this report addresses standards of Part 2 of the ESG for the external (sample) evaluation of a study programme. This is an activity that the SQAA implemented since the last full review against the ESG in 2018.

This report also addresses ESG 2.1 (Consideration of internal quality assurance) for the enhancement purposes of the agency, following the aims and objectives of the targeted review.

Finally, the review panel has addressed the agency's self-selected enhancement area ESG 3.3 (Independence).

The panel judged the agency's compliance with the ESG as listed in the table below:

Table 1. Summary of agency's compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3)

ESG	Compliance according to the targeted review ¹	Compliance transferred from the last full review ²
2.1	Compliant	N/A

¹ Compliance refers to the focus areas that were evaluated in depth and are part of the Terms of Reference, i.e., standards that were only partially compliant with the ESG during the last full review, ESG Part 2 for newly introduced or changed QA activities of the agency, ESG 2.1 for all QA activities and any standard affected by substantive changes since the last full review. If any of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG are covered due to the newly introduced or changed QA activities, a remark "for new or changed QA activities only" is added in brackets to the compliance assessment.

² Compliance refers to the last EQAR Register Committee decision for renewal of inclusion on the Register, or in case when an agency is not renewing its registration in EQAR, compliance refers to the last ENQA Agency Review report and should its judgement differ from that of the panel, the judgement of the ENQA Board, as stipulated in the membership decision letter by the ENQA Board. Compliance refers to the QA activities of the agency that were reviewed during the previous full review.

2.2	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant → Compliant
2.3	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant → Compliant
2.4	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant → Compliant
2.5	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant → Compliant
2.6	Compliant	N/A
2.7	Compliant (for new QA activity only)	Compliant → Compliant
3.1	N/A	Compliant → Compliant
3.2	N/A	Compliant → Compliant
3.3	N/A	Compliant → Compliant
3.4	Compliant	N/A
3.5	N/A	Compliant → Compliant
3.6	Compliant	N/A
3.7	N/A	Compliant (by virtue of applying) → Compliant

The agency chose to focus on independence as its enhancement area. Full details are provided in the relevant section of this report. The agency was justly proud of its independence, especially in comparison to other similar agencies in the region. To enhance the public perception of its independence and integrity, SQAA has taken a number of measures since 2018. These had been effective and were supported by all stakeholders. Stakeholders were supportive of efforts the agency might make to extend its international experts beyond the region, and to refine its use of data to reduce the regulatory burden.

Overall, the panel visited an agency that had responded very positively to the previous agency report. The agency had taken a number of steps to improve both areas that had been highlighted in the previous report, and more generally. The agency had improved significantly since 2018, and there was an evident culture of continuous improvement that gave the panel confidence that the agency would continue to improve in the future.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of The Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency, SQAA (Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije za kakovost v visokem šolstvu, NAKVIS) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. It is based on an external review conducted between July 2022 and December 2023 and should be read together with the external review report of the agency's last full review against the ESG.

This review report will be used for the renewal of SQAA's ENQA membership as well as SQAA's registration in 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 to verify that they comply with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on EQAR is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's ESG compliance. An external review is a prerequisite for registration.

SQAA has undergone two successful reviews against ESG Parts 2 and 3 (in 2014 and 2018), so it is eligible and has opted for a targeted review. The purpose of a targeted review is to ensure the agency's compliance with the ESG by covering standards that were found partially compliant during the agency's last renewal of registration in EQAR and on standards that could have been affected by substantive changes³ during the past five years while at the same time further strengthening the enhancement part of the review.

In the period between 2018 and 2023, SQAA has not submitted any substantive changes to EQAR.

This review, therefore, addresses standards of the ESG with which SQAA was found to be partially compliant in 2018, other possible changes to the external QA activities of the agency since the last review, and the enhancement area selected by SQAA.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

SQAA is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Accreditation of international joint programmes;
- Accreditation of new study programmes;
- Assessing the requirements for entry of transnational higher education (THE) to the SQAA register;
- External evaluation of vocational colleges;
- Extraordinary evaluation of higher education institutions;
- Extraordinary evaluation of study programmes;
- External (sample) evaluation of a study programme;
- Initial accreditation of higher education institutions;
- Reaccreditation of higher education institutions;

³ e.g. organisational changes, the launch of new external QA activities.

- Transformation of a higher education institution;
- Notifications of international joint programmes and programmes of the international associations of universities accredited abroad.

However, this targeted review is limited to an in-depth evaluation of:

- Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the EQAR Register Committee's last renewal decision (ESG 2.6 – Reporting; ESG 3.4 – Thematic analysis; ESG 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct);
- Standards 2.1 to 2.7 of the ESG for the external (sample) evaluation of a study programme;
- ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;
- Self-selected enhancement area: ESG 3.3 Independence.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2018 REVIEW

SQAA was last assessed against the ESG in 2018. According to the EQAR Register Committee's decision, SQAA demonstrated compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3) as follows:

- ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance - Compliance
- ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose - Compliance
- ESG 2.3 Implementing processes - Compliance
- ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts - Compliance
- ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes – Compliance
- ESG 2.6 Reporting - Partial compliance
- ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals - Compliance
- ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance - Compliance
- ESG 3.2 Official status - Compliance
- ESG 3.3 Independence - Compliance
- ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis - Partial compliance
- ESG 3.5 Resources - Compliance
- ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct - Partial compliance
- ESG 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies - Compliance (by virtue of applying).

Concerning ESG 2.6, the EQAR Register Committee pointed out two main challenges. First, it concurred with the review panel, which found that SQAA's website was not updated regularly, which led to a significant number of reports or decisions not being published in a timely manner or being difficult to access. The Register Committee noted that SQAA has since launched its new website, which addresses the issue according to SQAA's statement provided to EQAR following the submission of the review report. The Register Committee asked the next external review of SQAA (i.e., this targeted review) to analyse in detail whether the new website fully accounted for the shortcomings identified by the panel in 2018.

Second, the Register Committee further noted that reports from initial accreditation procedures with a negative outcome were not published, which hindered full transparency.

Regarding ESG 3.4, the EQAR Register Committee noted that SQAA swiftly responded to the review panel's analysis and published a "methodology and procedure for drafting and disseminating system-wide and thematic analyses". However, the Register Committee asked that the actual implementation be analysed within the next external review of SQAA (i.e., this targeted review).

Finally, in the context of ESG 3.6, the EQAR Register Committee stated that according to the 2018 review panel's report, SQAA has further systematised its internal QA system as required by the previous review in 2013. However, the Committee also noted the review panel's critical appraisal of SQAA's interaction with the different stakeholders from different types of higher education institutions, and whether the agency had shared its quality policy with all stakeholders. The Committee, therefore, considered that the recommendation was partially addressed and concurred with the panel's conclusion of partial compliance.

The review panel would like to note that the transfer of compliance with the ESG standards from the 2018 review applies to all activities that have been covered in the earlier review. The panel checked to ensure that there were no material changes to the work of the agency relevant to any other standard. In addition, the judgement on compliance for the standards of the ESG selected for evaluation in this targeted review has been made based on the evidence presented in 2023 and can differ following the agency's progress on the listed recommendations.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2023 external targeted review of SQAA was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, the EQAR Procedures for Applications, and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the targeted review of SQAA was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Alastair Delaney (Chair, ENQA nominee), Executive Director of Operations and Deputy Chief Executive, QAA, UK
- Janja Komljenovic (Secretary, ENQA nominee), Senior Lecturer, Lancaster University, UK
- Tatjana Volkova (Panel member, EUA nominee), Professor, BA School of Business and Finance, Latvia
- Damir Solak (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool), Financial Law and Financial Sciences (Doctoral Degree Study Programme), Masaryk University, Faculty of Law, Czechia

Goran Dakovic, ENQA's Head of Agency Reviews, acted as the review coordinator for this review.

The review took place from July 2022 to December 2023. The review panel received the SAR in December 2022. At the first briefing meeting on 19 January 2023, EQAR director, Colin Tuck, briefed the panel on the terms of reference and EQAR's expectations about this targeted review, while the review coordinator informed the panel of the overall review methodology and procedure. The review panel had an initial debate about the SAR and other documents received. The second meeting of the review panel took place on 14 February 2023 to further discuss the documents received and their understanding of SQAA's practices. The review panel met online with the agency contact person on 6 March 2023 to discuss the Slovenian HE system and the SQAA's operations. The review panel was in regular email contact between January and April 2023 to actively discuss panel members' findings, thoughts and impressions as they analysed the received material.

The review panel asked for additional information to be sent before the site visit. The information that the panel wanted to receive was identified after reading the SAR and all the other documents received (previous SAR, ENQA review report 2018, complaints against SQAA, SQAA follow-up report). The requested information included clarification on the volume and impact of SQAA's Director's visits to HEIs and QA agencies abroad, events that SQAA organised for HE stakeholders,

examples of draft reports in English written by experts, examples of SQAA newsletters, and similar. The agency sent all requested information to the panel.

The site visit took place from 22nd to 24th March 2023 in person.

Following the visit, the draft review report was completed in April 2023 and sent to SQAA for the factual check in early May 2023. The final review report was submitted to the ENQA's Agency Reviews Committee in end May 2023.

The review panel would like to confirm that the arrangements by ENQA provided for a smooth and well-coordinated review process.

All the findings and conclusions included in this report are the joint opinion of the review panel and have been agreed on during the report drafting process.

Self-assessment report

SQAA's SAR was prepared as a basis for this targeted review coordinated by ENQA. The SAR's main objectives are said to be the improvement of the quality of the agency's activities and fulfilling the conditions for extending membership in ENQA and renewing registration in EQAR.

The SAR was prepared in 2022 and focused on the period between 2020 and 2022. The agency also attached the previous internal self-assessment report, which was published in 2020 and covered activities between 2018 and 2019.

The SAR was prepared by SQAA's self-assessment team of five employees and the SQAA's Council President. External stakeholders, including representatives of the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Slovenia, the Union of Independent Institutions of Higher Education, the Association of Slovene Higher Vocational Colleges and the Student Organisation of Slovenia, also contributed to the report.

The SAR is extensive and detailed. It consists of five chapters covering (i) the presentation of the agency and its activities, including changes since the last ENQA review, (ii) progress on the standards of the ESG where SQAA was partially compliant in 2018, (iii) selected quality improvement areas, (iv) SWOT analysis and (v) future challenges and opportunities.

SQAA conducted several surveys, focus groups and other activities that were analysed and included in SAR. First, the staff survey reported on staff satisfaction and perception of their work. Second, the stakeholder survey asked stakeholders about their perception of SQAA's activities and procedures. Third, focus groups were organised with representatives of HEIs and vocational colleges to collect their views for the SWOT analysis. Finally, SQAA organises several formal and informal meetings and opportunities to collect stakeholders' feedback continuously that were reflected upon in the SAR as well.

The review panel found the SAR to be comprehensive and covering all activities of the agency. It did not focus only on the areas of the targeted review. In fact, the targeted review sections were only one chapter in the SAR. The review panel appreciated the broader description of the agency's operations.

Site visit

The site visit took place on 22nd – 24th March 2023 in person. The review schedule was agreed upon in advance by the review panel and SQAA.

The review panel met with SQAA's staff and HE stakeholders. It organised sessions to fit the Slovenian context, as well as the nature of the targeted review. The panel organised two sessions with a focused debate on the selected enhancement area of independence. In addition, the self-selected enhancement area was discussed in other sessions with internal and external stakeholders.

The review panel met with the following representatives:

- SQAA leadership
- SQAA staff
- SQAA Council members
- SQAA Appeals Committee members
- Vocational colleges
- HEIs, including a separate session with private HEIs
- Students
- Ministry
- Reviewers' pool
- The working group that was preparing draft legislation on the QA agency.

All interviews were conducted in English with a small number of participants using an interpreter external to SQAA. The interpreter was present at all sessions to support those participants who felt they would rather speak in Slovenian. The review team felt that everyone was able to express themselves during the sessions.

It was decided not to conduct a separate interview with the working group responsible for producing the SAR, as the members of this group would fully overlap with the participants in other sessions.

When discussing the issues related to standards 2.2 to 2.7, the participants of the meetings were asked to focus mainly on the external evaluation of sample study programmes, as per the terms of reference for this targeted review. However, for ESG 2.6, the review team investigated SQAA's operations in their entirety.

The review panel used the possibility to clarify any pending issues on the last day of the visit.

The review panel appreciates the openness of all interviewees invited by SQAA and the quality of all discussions. The review panel felt welcome and was able to conduct the site visit in a manner appropriate for a targeted and enhancement-oriented review. The panellists believe the SQAA was productive and professional. The agency staff were well prepared, forthright and engaged. At this point, the panel wishes to thank them for their engagement and positive contribution to all discussions. Finally, the panel wishes to emphasise that the student panel members contributed fully to all discussions and meetings of the site visit.

CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

There have been no changes in the HE or QA system since the last visit in 2018.

There has been a change in the national context. In 2018, the review panel described SQAA's efforts in proposing and working towards legislative changes to introduce a new Agency Act. This law was predicted to govern SQAA and quality-related issues in HE. The idea was that it would resolve SQAA's open issues, such as conducting QA procedures abroad; and also that it would be more open and flexible as a smaller piece of legislation in case anything needs to be updated in future. SQAA worked closely with HE stakeholders and the proposed law was agreed by all. Before it was sent to the Parliament for discussion, a change of the Minister responsible for HE due to the national elections, led to the pause in processing this legal proposal. Since the national elections in 2022, the new Minister organised a stakeholder working group, which is coordinating a broader set of changes in HE legislation. SQAA is part of the discussion. At the interviews, all stakeholders supported SQAA's efforts and agreed legal proposals regarding the agency and the QA-related topics. The Ministry representatives were in agreement with SQAA and other stakeholders. The panel was told that it is only a question of how best to place proposed changes – as part of the bigger HE law change, or to introduce a separate Agency Act. The panel has all reason to believe that the intention of the Ministry and all stakeholders are for the legal changes to improve SQAA's legal arrangements.

At the site visit, the panel also learned from the SQAA that the HE system is now more stabilised in the country. All established HE programmes went through one cycle of SQAA evaluation, there was a legislative move towards consolidation with a move towards institutional accreditation and sample programme evaluation, and the number of HE institutions and overall study programmes has stabilised.

SQAA'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

There have been no changes in the governance of the agency since the last visit in 2018.

The agency has 20 employees, which is the same number as reported in SAR in 2018.

The agency changed its internal operational structure twice since the last visit in 2018. In 2020, one department was separated in two to support the agency's focus on analytical work. In 2022, the agency reorganised professional services into three departments: the Quality Assurance and International Cooperation Department (7 staff members), the Analytics and Information Technology Department (7 staff members) and the General Affairs Department (5 staff members). The reorganisation was intended to separate various departments' responsibilities better and support the leadership transition. Two heads of departments are anticipated to retire soon, and the reorganisation is supporting a handover and introduction of their replacements. The panel found the organisation of the agency to work well and appropriately supports all operations that the agency performs.

SQAA'S FUNDING

There have been no changes in the funding of the agency since the last visit in 2018. SAR reports that the agency has enough resources for its operations. Moreover, it states that since the previous self-assessment, the agency has increased its financial resources, which are fully sufficient for its operation.

SQAA'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

Since 2018, the agency has implemented one new procedure in its portfolio of QA activities, i.e., annual evaluations of a sample of study programmes. During the last ENQA review in 2018, this procedure was set up formally but not yet implemented. Hence, the review panel in this review focused on both the formal side of the process and its implementation and practice. We cover our findings below under standards of the ESG 2.1 to 2.7.

Each year, SQAA identifies a sample of study programmes in a selected field. In 2019, the agency focused on the study programmes which had not been re-accredited before and those that had dislocated units outside Slovenia. In 2020, the focus was on the international dimension; in 2021, the sample was drawn from teacher training study programmes, and in 2022, the focus was on the third-cycle study programmes. 72 evaluations of study programmes samples were carried out between 2019 and 2022.

There were no other changes in SQAA's functions, activities and procedures. However, we copy a table from SAR to showcase the scale of the agency's operations since the last review.

Table 2. Copied from SAR: Decisions in accreditation and evaluation procedures since 2018

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Study programmes						
Accreditation of new programmes ^a	9	29	13	17	9	77
Withdrawal of application for accreditation	1	8	7	5 + 1 rejected	4	26
Negative decisions in accreditation procedures	2	1	1	0	1	5
Evaluation of a sample (all) ^b	/	12	18	27	17	74
Non-compliances identified	/	4	4	2	8	18
Extraordinary evaluation	1	1	0	0	1 + 1(HEI)	4
Total	13	55	43	52	41	204
Higher education institutions						
Initial accreditation ^c	0	0	0	1	0	1
Reaccreditation (all) ^d	0	2	7	4	13	26
Reaccreditation for a shorter period	0	0	4	1	4	9
Transformation	2	0	1	2	2	7
Withdrawal of application in HEI procedures	1 (initial accreditation)	2 (reaccreditation + transformation)	0	0	0	3
Negative decisions in HEI procedures	0	1 (initial accreditation)	1 (initial accreditation)	0	1	3
Total	3	5	13	8	20	49
Higher vocational colleges^e						
External evaluation (positive and qualified positive opinions)	9	15	8	8	10	50
Negative opinions	0	0	0	1	1	2
Total	9	15	8	9	11	52

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

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

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

2018 review recommendation

In the 2018 review, the panel and the Register Committee found SQAA to be partially compliant with ESG 3.4.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to develop a method for producing and disseminating thematic analyses on issues relevant to its stakeholders.

Register Committee stated:

The Register Committee, therefore, concurred with the panel's conclusion that SQAA partially complies with the standard.

Evidence

At the last review in 2018, the panel heard the Director's plans to establish an analytical department within SQAA. Moreover, the new information system, eNAKVIS was expected to support various analyses with more efficient access to data.

This panel learned that the analytics department was indeed established in 2019; initially with additional tasks (international cooperation and IT) and in 2022 as a stand-alone unit. As described in the Introduction section, the agency is organised into three departments, of which the analytical section is one. With seven staff members, it is also substantially resourced compared to other departments as they have seven and five staff members, respectively. The information system iNAKVIS was also set up, which provides a good basis for accessing data for analyses.

Based on the SAR and discussions at the site visit, the Analytics and Information Technology Department's main areas of work are preparing, conducting, writing and publishing plans and reports, strategy documents, analyses, manuals, guides and the agency's annual publications. The department also organises and participates in various conferences, consultations, training sessions and workshops. Moreover, it is responsible for setting up databases, IT tasks and any translation work. The SAR stated (p. 36) that SQAA conducted five thematic analyses since the ENQA review in 2018.

To address the recommendations of the ENQA's panel in 2018, SQAA wrote and adopted a Methodology and Procedure for the Production and Dissemination of Thematic Analyses. SAR reports

that this document sets out the detailed procedure for systemic analyses and the framework for the dissemination of their findings, as well as external stakeholders' participation in initiating and producing subsequent more detailed (thematic) analyses. Based on SAR, the document also clearly defines the target group of these analyses.

The panel checked the document, and it found it to be clear. It includes guidelines on process, approach and cyclicity of analyses. After describing system-wide and thematic reports and their purpose, the document explains that stakeholders may initiate analyses by submitting a suggestion to the agency, which the analytics department reviews. The document also elaborates on information that needs to be included in analysis reports (author name, initiator, list of sources and literature and similar). Stakeholders have an opportunity to suggest analyses also at various meetings and events that the agency organises. The review panel discussed thematic analyses with external stakeholders and staff in detail and found that everyone felt the agency conducts useful and relevant analyses, that it does so regularly and that everyone can initiate suggestions. SQAA Council gets familiarised with all conducted analyses, while findings are also presented to stakeholders and published on the agency's website. The SAR further reports that SQAA continuously extends and deepens thematic cooperation with different stakeholders through training sessions for professionals and employees and consultations for other interested higher education stakeholders.

The Methodology document specifies that system-wide analysis is done every five years at the end of the five-year institutional evaluation cycle. This meta-analysis includes individual study areas, types of study programmes, types of institutions or individual areas of assessment and quality indicators. The general system-wide analysis examines general results according to generalised indicators, which are consistently based on all standards of quality of all areas of assessment. The 2018 panel found that the first system analysis was published in 2013, covering the period 2010-2013. The second was published in 2018, covering the period 2014-2017. This panel found that the next analysis (covering 2018 – 2023) is ongoing; some analysis of data has been completed, and the report is under preparation and will be published in 2024.

In addition, the agency conducts specific thematic analyses that address specific issues, which are conducted annually. The Methodology document mentioned before sets out the process for determining annual specific analyses, which the Council decides after input from other relevant stakeholders.

Finally, the agency conducts research supporting the sector on various issues, such as transnational education, distance learning and independence. The panel found this to be in addition to thematic analyses as per the ESG 3.4 requirement.

Analysis

The 2018 recommendation to SQAA was to develop a method for producing and disseminating thematic analyses. This was completed, and EQAR was informed. EQAR asked this panel to check the implementation of this Methodology. The panel recognises the effort that SQAA put into work around thematic and system analyses, which resulted in strong analytical work. SQAA conducts relevant analyses for the sector and is responsive to stakeholders' needs in this respect.

First, the Methodology document sets out the procedure and cyclicity of publishing. The agency follows the Methodology and regularly publishes reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external QA activities. As mentioned, the meta-analysis is published every five years, with the most recent one under preparation at the time of the panel's visit. Moreover, the panel found that the Guide to external analysis, prepared in 2021 and published in 2022, is found to be incredibly useful by all internal and external stakeholders (agency staff, review experts, HEIs and the

Ministry). The Guide includes analytical sections in that each criterion the SQAA defines is elaborated on and includes the analysis of the most common mistakes in understanding and implementing particular criteria. In addition, it includes analyses of appropriate implementation. All stakeholders referred to this document and the analysis behind it as useful in their everyday operation, as well as contributing to the reflection on and the improvement of QA policies and processes at institutional and national levels.

Second, the panel found that in addition to the system-wide analyses (5-year meta-report and the Guidelines for external assessment), SQAA also conducts specific thematic analyses annually, as suggested by various stakeholders. Moreover, as mentioned before, continuous research is conducted to support the HE system on other relevant issues.

Third, the agency includes its Council members in discussing analyses, its findings, and stakeholders through various bespoke events. At the visit, the panel found that all stakeholders confirmed that SQAA's analytical work is high quality and relevant. They also assured the panel that the agency staff are highly competent and knowledgeable in analytical and advisory work, who, in addition to publishing various analyses and research, also advise and support the sector via events, meetings, training and other means, including social media posting of information; or simply a phone call.

Finally, the panel found that while the agency prepared and implemented the Methodology and conducted and published analyses, there might be terminology differences between the ESG and the Methodology document. For example, while the ESG specifies thematic analyses to refer to analysing evaluation reports, the SQAA uses the terminology of thematic analyses to refer to these (analyses of evaluation reports) as well as to research more broadly. For the clarity of the diversity of analyses and research conducted, the panel recommends that SQAA considers the terminology it uses for different kinds of research and analytical work.

Panel commendation 1

The panel commends the agency on the Guide for external assessment since it includes elements of thematic analysis that are presented jointly with the methodological instructions for conducting external QA. It is deemed of high relevance and usefulness by all stakeholders

Panel commendation 2

The panel commends the agency on its internally developed IT system, which is high quality and relevant in supporting the agency with data for research and as a resource to manage labour and processes.

Panel recommendation 1

The panel recommends that SQAA considers the terminology used for thematic analyses and other kinds of research it conducts.

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.

2018 review recommendations

In 2018, SQAA was found to be partially compliant with ESG 3.6 by the ENQA panel and the Register Committee.

The ENQA review panel highlighted a number of concerns in its analysis of SQAA's compliance with this standard. The panel found that while SQAA's documents, such as the Quality Manual, imply a proper internal QA system for the agency, its implementation seems to be mismatched. The panel's concerns mostly address a potential lack of quality culture, internal constituents' involvement in SQAA's QA (including the agency's Council and employees), external stakeholders' involvement in feedback mechanisms beyond filling out a survey, and similar. The panel was also concerned with stakeholders' perceptions of different treatments by the SQAA depending on which HEI they are from.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to include external stakeholders more directly in the internal evaluation and quality improvement activities of the agency. Also, proper feedback should be provided to better inform stakeholders about the results of surveys/actions taken by the agency. In addition, SQAA is recommended to involve all its bodies in the conception and implementation of its internal QA policy. As the highest decision-making body, the agency's Council could lead the way and play a more active role.

Register Committee stated:

The Register Committee, however, also noted the review panel's critical appraisal of SQAA's interaction with the different stakeholders from different types of HEIs, and the question raised whether its quality policy was shared by all stakeholders. The Committee therefore considered that the flag was partially addressed and concurred with the panel's conclusion.

Evidence

Preparation of SAR

The SAR stated that it was prepared by the agency self-evaluation group (SEG) composed of staff and one Council member. The agency also invited external stakeholders to participate in the SAR preparation and nominated the 'external team', composed of representatives of the Rectors' Conference of the Republic of Slovenia, the Union of Independent Institutions of Higher Education, the Association of Slovene Higher Vocational Colleges and Student Organisation of Slovenia. The agency SEG prepared the text and led the procedure, while the external group commented on the draft text and participated in the preparation of the survey questionnaire that was sent out to stakeholders more broadly. Stakeholders also fed input via focus groups that the agency organised. The SAR was then discussed at agency staff meetings and Council sessions and finally adopted by the Director.

At the site visit, the panel found that stakeholders had even more formal and informal opportunities to feed back to the SQAA for SAR and, more generally. SQAA developed an enhancement-oriented quality culture, which stakeholders share. HEIs, vocational colleges, students, and others reported that they are continuously being asked to provide feedback on the agency's work and suggestions for improvement consistently, formally, and informally. The panel learned that SQAA successfully established trusted relationships for an open discussion with its stakeholders on how it operates, including rules and procedures, as well as its processes and ways of working.

Quality Manual

The SAR stated that the Quality Manual is a central document for SQAA internal QA. The document was last updated in 2021 to introduce a new timeline of self-evaluation. SAR states that the basis for an internal QA is the SAR, which the agency, following the amendment of the Quality Manual in June 2021, prepares prior to the external review by ENQA, and a progress report prepared annually.

The panel analysed the quality manual and described the procedures laid out in it in the following paragraphs.

SQAA defines its QA procedures in the Quality Manual, first adopted in 2015 and last updated in June 2021. The document elaborates on five areas of QA: (i) accreditations and external evaluations, (ii) external system of QA of the agency, (iii) internal system of QA of the agency, (iv) criteria and other provisions, and (v) information system and provision of information. The third area is SQAA's internal QA, which specifies five sub-areas (management of the agency; agency Council; human resources; improvement of the internal QA system; meta-reports and meta-analyses).

These five areas with numerous sub-areas specify a large and substantial quality assessment approach. The quality standards are defined for each of those areas. There are elaborated indicators for quality assessment (more than 70), which makes quality assessment thorough. Before the visit, the panel was concerned that this system might be too bureaucratic. However, internal and external stakeholders found the approach to the QA clear and constructive.

The Quality Manual specifies the self-evaluation group to consist of at least four employees and one Council member; and is appointed for one self-evaluation period, which is said to be five years. The group cooperates with external stakeholders. The quality loop is specified to include a connection between (i) the agency's work and action plan, (ii) implementation of tasks from the plan and reporting of it, (iii) SAR and work and operation report, (iv) assessment of self-evaluation findings and determination of measures of improvement. The work and financial plans are annual documents, and so are the operation and financial reports.

The Manual further specifies that SAR is produced by the self-evaluation group one year before the expiration of ENQA membership and EQAR listing, i.e. at least once in a five-year period. SAR is based on the annual work or action plan. From meetings with the Council members and external stakeholders, the panel found that the SAR is discussed at the Council sessions, and stakeholders are included in its preparation. The SQAA Director adopts the final SAR.

SQAA annual work report includes an assessment of objectives and measures in various chapters.

Connecting with stakeholders

To respond to the recommendations from 2018 about improving feedback mechanisms from stakeholders, SQAA adopted a new communication plan in 2018. Based on it and since 2018, SQAA's Director has visited all HEIs in the country between 2020 and 2022. The agency also organises an annual international conference on QA in HE since 2019. In addition, the agency organises numerous meetings, working groups and other events to connect with stakeholders. Moreover, the agency publishes all relevant documents in both their draft and final forms on its website, allowing stakeholders to comment.

The agency uses social media to communicate with various communities (Twitter and YouTube). It also introduced a monthly e-newsletter to inform stakeholders on issues related to the agency's work.

The Council engages with stakeholders too. Its members accompanied the Director on visits to HEIs. They also take part in the agency's events and expert training.

Analysis

The panel found that the SQAA has the mentioned Quality manual, which everyone is aware of and uses. The agency also has other documents to guide its work, including the Methodology for analyses and the Guide for external assessment. All of these documents and practices can be understood as the agency's quality policy as they are consistently used to improve the agency's work and continuously strive for quality enhancement. The panel found that the stakeholders know how to give feedback on the quality of SQAA's work and feel heard and having an impact. The understanding of the QA process is shared among all stakeholders.

The panel found that SQAA Council members are included in SQAA's internal QA and other work. They also engage with stakeholders in various ways, as listed in the evidence section. Therefore, the Council members' inclusion, as per the recommendation from 2018, is now improved.

As mentioned, the agency includes stakeholders in self-assessment and SAR preparation in three ways. First, their representatives are part of the 'extended' group who participate in self-assessment and writing up of the SAR. Second, a survey is sent out to stakeholders more broadly (but in 2022, it had only 131 respondents, while in 2019, it had 380). Third, the draft text is published on the agency website for anyone to comment. The panel found that there are numerous other formal and informal opportunities for stakeholders to feed into SQAA's work and give feedback that SQAA could have highlighted within the SAR. For example, in addition to collecting formal feedback after each evaluation procedure, the agency staff has an informal discussion with the respective HEI about its experience. Another example is the Director's visits to HEIs that included Council members and staff. These are just two examples of various new and informal ways that the SQAA established to communicate with its stakeholders over the past five years. The panel found that stakeholders appreciate these new opportunities; and that the agency established trusted relationships. The panel finds ultimate evidence of impact of this is that review experts report they are now treated warmly and with trust by HEIs when they conduct evaluations compared to the past when they were treated with suspicion and reservation. The progress that SQAA has made since the last review is immense.

Panel commendation I

The panel commends the agency on all the formal and informal ways of communication that it has established with its stakeholders over the past years. The agency worked specifically towards strengthening trusted relationships with stakeholders that go beyond the notion of control, which was particularly hard in the national context with reported over-regulation. With consistent and reliable multiple channels of communication, SQAA established a reputation as a valued and reliable partner.

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 I of the ESG.

2018 review recommendation

No recommendations were made in 2018.

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations in entirety as per the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

Evidence

All the external QA activities of SQAA are described in the supporting documents associated with each procedure, which are accessible on the website. As detailed in the SAR, and confirmed by the panel, the Accreditation Criteria are aligned with national higher education legislation (ZViS) and the ESG. The Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance (Part I of the ESG) are addressed in the Accreditation Criteria and cover all of the agency's processes – the accreditation and external evaluation of HEIs and study programmes and external evaluation of higher vocational colleges. Study programmes selected for evaluation of samples are assessed according to the same quality standards as those set out in the Accreditation Criteria for assessing study programmes in the reaccreditation process of HEIs.

The SAR provides a table detailing the alignment of the agency's assessment schemes with the ESG Part I. According to the table, the agency has considered all the ESG part I in the criteria of its procedures.

Table 3. Compliance of the SQAA's EQA procedures with the ESG part I

ESG – Part 1 STANDARDS	Higher education institutions		Study programmes		Higher vocational colleges
	Accreditation (Articles 7 to 9 of the Accreditation Criteria)	Reaccreditation (Articles 10 to 16 of the Accreditation Criteria)	Accreditation (Articles 17 to 20 of the Accreditation Criteria)	External evaluation (Articles 21 to 23 of the Accreditation Criteria)	External evaluation (Articles 6 to 10 of the Criteria for External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges).
(1) Quality assurance policy	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 1, 6, Article 16	ST 1, 2, 4	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 1, 6, 19
(2) Design and adoption of study programmes	ST 1, 6, 7	ST 2, 7, Article 16 (+ Chapter II.2.2)	ST 1, 2	ST 1	ST 18, 20, 21
(3) Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	ST 3, 4, 10	ST 2, 11, 12	ST 4, 5	ST 4, 5	ST 10, 11, 12, 13, 21
(4) Enrolment, progress, recognition and validation of knowledge of students	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 6, 10, 11, 12, 13 (+ Chapter II.2.2 + Article 23)	ST 5	ST 5	ST 2, 4, 5, 9, 12
(5) Teachers	ST 6, 7	ST 3, 8	ST 4	ST 4, 5	ST 3, 8, 21, 22
(6) Learning resources and student support	ST 4, 8, 9, 10, 11	ST 4, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17	ST 3, 4	ST 4	ST 4, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21
(7) Information management	ST 5	ST 5, 6	ST 1	ST 1	ST 5, 6, 15, 17, 18
(8) Information to the public	ST 1, 3	ST 5, 7	* Covered under institutional evaluation.	ST 5 (+ Chapter II.2.2)	ST 5, 7, 22
(9) Continuous monitoring and periodic assessment of study programmes	ST 1, 5 (+ Article 21, 22 + Chapter II.2.2)	ST 6, 13, Article 16	* Covered under institutional evaluation.	ST 1, 2, 3	ST 6, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21
(10) Cyclical external quality assurance	* Chapters III.3 and III.4 of the Accreditation Criteria				ST 1 (+ Chapter III.3.1 of the Criteria for External Evaluation of Higher Vocational Colleges).

Analysis

The review panel explored the compliance of all SQAA's EQA activities with ESG Part I, with a particular focus on the new activity introduced since the previous full review: External (sample) evaluation of a study programme. As confirmed by agency staff and stakeholders, apart from the newly introduced procedure, the agency's review work has not changed since the last ENQA review. The panel checked to ensure that the references in the table above were part of each procedure's handbook. The panel further checked a sample of reports to ensure that the references in the table above were actually present within the reports. In both cases, matters were as described in the SAR. Interviews with representatives of HEIs revealed that they were content that SQAA's procedures supported their institution's responsibility for QA. In particular, they stated that the agency's evaluation supports the enhancement of their own quality procedures and the quality culture more generally. They stated that the agency's quality of evaluation has advanced in recent years, including the support documents and tools, the support of the agency staff, the quality of reviewers' work, the diversity of reviewers, the quality of reviewers' recommendations, and so on. The outputs of the SQAA evaluation were deemed positively impactful. Consequently, the panel was content that these procedures remained compliant with this standard.

The panel looked more closely at compliance related to the new activity, as demonstrated below with standards ESG 2.2 – 2.7. The panel focused only on this new activity with the exception of ESG 2.6, which is a standard that was partially compliant in 2018. For this reason, the panel considered SQAA's operations in their entirety for ESG 2.6.

The panel determines that the newly introduced activity - External (sample) evaluation of a study programme - is compliant with ESG 2.1 as it follows the same standards and procedures as other methods. Consequently, and taken together with the compliance of the existing evaluative activity, SQAA is compliant with this standard.

Specifically:

- I.1 Policy for quality assurance – the methodology checks that a policy is in place, how it was developed and how effective it is.
- I.2 Design and approval of programmes – The methodology analyses how programmes are designed and approved and that these meet required standards.
- I.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment – the methodology examines the role of students and how they engage with the programme.
- I.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification – the methodology checks the processes from admission to qualification and how consistently they are applied.
- I.5 Teaching staff – the methodology checks the competence of the teaching staff
- I.6 Learning resources and student support – the methodology checks the learning resources available to students to support their study.
- I.7 Information management – the methodology examines what data and information is gathered and how it is used to manage programmes.
- I.8 Public information – the methodology checks the quality and relevance of the information available about the programme.
- I.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes – the methodology checks how programmes are reviewed – how often and what improvements are made as a result.
- I.10 Cyclical external quality assurance – the methodology checks the institutions status re regular external review.

To conclude, the panel considered all of the methodologies developed and used by the agency. The panel also confirms there have been no changes since 2018 apart from the implementation of the sample programme evaluation. All stakeholders confirmed this.

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.

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found it substantially compliant, while the Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.2.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to apply the adopted Methodology with maximum flexibility, ensuring its fitness for purpose for all Slovenian institutions regardless of size and profile. If need be, the Methodology should be revised in order to make it more effective. In addition, SQAA is recommended to focus on quality enhancement rather than quality control and to foster further development of a quality culture within Slovenian higher education.

Register Committee stated: /

Evidence

The evaluation of sample of study programmes is SQAA's new activity since the agency's last ENQA review in 2018. This evaluation is designed to be advisory in nature and aims to promote the quality improvement of study programmes. The SAR reports that this procedure allows SQAA's experts and council members to advise HEIs on quality enhancement and modifying of study programmes without burdening institutions. This very procedure is thus making SQAA's processes more fit for purpose.

After an evaluation, the agency Council makes recommendations for institutions to improve the quality of the particular study programme. The institution is expected to report back on progress in a given time period, normally two years. After reviewing such progress reports, the Council decides if their recommendations have been implemented. If any particular problems are found at the evaluation, then an HEI is requested to implement a change immediately and report back sooner. The agency staff and the Council then check this.

In 2019, the agency organised a training about this new procedure for its experts to support its implementation. SAR reports stakeholders' satisfaction with this new approach.

Analysis

The panel finds the new process fit for purpose. It allows experts and the Council to be more flexible and to take into account the specific context of particular HEIs and their study programmes. This is especially so because the outputs of this procedure are recommendations and not accreditation decisions. In this way, the experts and the Council can support the specificities of HEIs and study programmes while respecting the criteria and standards.

The panel checked stakeholders' satisfaction with this new procedure at the site visit, in particular HEIs. The panel learned from interviews with the stakeholders that this new process is much more useful than the previous approaches. They also find it enhancement oriented. Consequently, HEIs appreciate this new process and the way that SQAA conducts it.

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

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant, while the Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.3.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to determine the nature of the follow-up in its QA processes, and not only in external assessments with a negative outcome. Furthermore, SQAA is recommended to develop a shared understanding of criteria and publish the official interpretation of the criteria and regulations.

Register Committee stated:

The Register Committee accepted that this constitutes a form of follow up and was therefore able to concur with the panel's conclusion that SQAA complies with the standard. The Committee nevertheless considered that the corresponding flag was only partially addressed and encouraged SQAA to seriously consider the panel's recommendations.

Evidence

All accreditation and evaluation procedures, including for the evaluated one, start with the submission of an application accompanied by a self-evaluation report of the HEI, followed by the assessment of the documents and the visit to the institution, the preparation of the group of experts' report, which is sent to the applicants for comments, and the preparation of the final

report, in which the group of experts assess the comments sent. The agency Council, as the highest decision-making body, then takes a decision on the basis of the final report, the application, the institutional self-evaluation report and other documentation obtained in the process. These procedures are specified in the Criteria for evaluation and accreditation, Guide to assessment and the Rules of Procedure of the Agency Council. Moreover, the templates that HE institutions need to fill out include detailed instructions.

SQAA acted on the 2018 recommendations of the ENQA review to ask HEIs for follow-up in QA processes and for assessments beyond those with negative outcomes. SQAA updated its procedures in 2020 so that in case of positive accreditation outcomes, HEIs report on their progress within two years or earlier in case experts found deficiencies at the evaluation. These reports can be done within institutions' self-evaluation in that it forms a part of a standard self-evaluation activity. This is so that update reports do not bring much additional work to institutions. SAR reports that this practice further strengthens the internal QA of HEIs.

Sample study programme evaluations started in 2019; hence, the first progress reports were considered in 2021. The agency found most reports to adequately report on institutions' progress in relation to the programmes since the review.

Analysis

The panel finds the processes to be implemented in accordance with the requirements of the standard. Sample study programmes are evaluated based on the same criteria as other evaluation and accreditation activities (starting with the self-evaluation report, then with the expert site visit resulting in a report and having a consistent follow-up). Moreover, SQAA puts effort into ensuring the follow-up procedure on all accreditation decisions, negative and positive, including for the evaluated activity.

Following ENQA's recommendation in 2018, the panel asked HEIs how they found this new procedure of follow-up in all of the agency's activities in 2 years. It found that they appreciate the new procedure and the support from the SQAA. The panel also found that the SQAA communicates with HEIs how best to ensure follow-up without extra burden on institutions. While HEIs reported that follow-up obviously requires some work, the agency commendably listens to suggestions on making this as light and tailored as possible.

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).

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant, while the Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.4.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended reconsidering the expert pool especially given the introduction of institutional reviews. The expert pool should be sufficiently diverse and include students of all types of Slovenian institutions. Special efforts and extra resources are needed to engage (more) international peers.

Register Committee stated: /

Evidence

SQAA has elaborated Criteria for agency experts adopted in 2018 and updated in 2022. The criteria include conditions for experts that serve in all types of external QA activities of HEIs by the agency.

SQAA organised training for experts who served on sample study programme evaluations in 2019, and a detailed protocol has been developed for sample study programme evaluations. They also ran a specific training session for chairs on this new procedure.

Analysis

The panel found that sample study programme evaluation is carried out by groups of external experts that include student members. The experts are carefully selected, have appropriate skills and are supported by the agency via training and other activities. Proper no-conflict-of-interest mechanisms are applied in the same way as in other accreditation and evaluation procedures. International experts are increasingly included in the sample programme evaluation as the updated Criteria also require at least one international expert to be part of the expert panels for all evaluations that SQAA conducts.

SAR states that the agency received criticisms from some HEIs regarding the expertise of experts. Consequently, it amended its criteria for experts to demand that experts must have been active in scientific and research, professional or artistic fields for the last ten years, except for student members. SAR states that this change meant that the assessments are carried out by experts who are active in research in their field and have more clout among HEIs. SQAA also works hard to increase the diversity of its expert pool. It signed memorandums of cooperation with ESU to include more international students; it cooperates with other agencies to share experts or recruit experts more widely; it publishes the call for experts on the websites of other agencies and networks, and so on.

The panel asked the agency about the experts and found that HEIs believe the diversity and competency of experts have increased substantially over the past years. They think that experts are now better trained and supported. As a result, they come better prepared for the site visits than before. HEIs also reported on experts being knowledgeable and providing useful advice. More international experts are also included in the reviews beyond the Balkans area. Key documentation is translated into English so that they can prepare properly. After the visit, the draft reports are written in English and translated into Slovenian for the official procedure at the Council session.

The panel asked HEIs about their satisfaction with experts for sample programme reviews, and it found that the majority of experts are appropriately prepared for enhancement-oriented evaluations. However, they mentioned that there is a small number of experts who do not differentiate between enhancement-oriented sample evaluation and accreditation that is focused on checking standards. At the same time, HEIs felt that the number of such experts is small and that the agency will continue training experts in this regard. Therefore, HEIs had no particular concerns regarding experts and confirmed that the agency has appropriate tools and procedures in place to support the experts in their work. The panel found that SQAA plans to continuously train and support experts in future

and concurs with HEIs that experts will be better and better versed in differentiating between enhancement and accreditation procedures.

The panel also discussed this with the experts themselves. It found that the experts say they get relevant and appropriate training. They also appreciate the tools and documents that the agency developed for them. The experts report that the agency staff offers extensive support in their work. Students feel equal members of review teams, appreciated and able to contribute the same as everyone else.

To conclude, the panel learned that the same criteria for panels are used in the new procedure (sample programme evaluation) as in other programme accreditation, but the outcome is different. In the sample programme evaluation, HEIs receive recommendations which are enhancement oriented. In accreditation, they receive a yes/no decision. The expert composition and the procedure are the same, but expert panels have been trained for this new procedure, know how to adjust and receive written and oral guidance.

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.

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant. The Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.2.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to encourage institutions to include consistent follow-up procedures in their internal quality assurance system. In addition, SQAA is recommended to formalise the decision-taking process taking into account the different roles and tasks of the expert panel (external assessment report), the agency's Director and staff (proposal for decision), and the agency Council (formal decision).

Register Committee stated:

Having considered the clarification, the Register Committee was able to concur with the panel's conclusion that SQAA complies with the standard.

Evidence

The standards and criteria for the evaluation of study programmes are described in the Accreditation Criteria and are the same for all programme evaluation variants (a study programme may be evaluated as part of the process of reaccreditation of an HEI, evaluation of a sample of a

study programme or an extraordinary evaluation of a study programme). The criteria are published on the SQAA website, together with the accreditation application forms that HEIs use. These forms provide further details and clarification. In addition, the agency prepared and published an interpretation of some of the criteria in 2019 and a Guide to assessment in 2022. The agency also published a series of videos on YouTube about navigating the accreditation process and criteria to help in the consistency of stakeholders' understanding of the criteria and SQAA's approach to using them.

Analysis

The panel found the criteria for an evaluation of sample study programmes explicit and published.

SQAA reported in various sections of the SAR that some stakeholders (particularly smaller and private HEIs) report they feel the agency treats HEIs differently and is not consistent in decision-making. The panel inquired various stakeholders about this in relation to the evaluation of sample study programmes as well as more broadly. It found that all stakeholders feel the agency in its entirety (staff, experts, the Director, the Council) treats them fairly and equally. No-one reported any unequal treatment. All stakeholders that the panel met reported that SQAA uses criteria consistently.

The agency ensures consistent application of criteria via educative activities, such as internal coordination and training of staff and Council Members, training of experts, and training and workshops for HEIs and stakeholders. Moreover, the Council continuously reflects on its decisions and in 2018 adopted the Rules of Procedure of the Agency Council, which specifies the procedure for processing applications, decision-making, and the role of SQAA's professional. In 2020 and 2022, the Rules of Procedure were amended to further specify Council's decision-making process and its consistency, such as having designated rapporteurs, or preparing tables with strengths, opportunities for improvement, partial compliances and non-compliances or major deficiencies across decision objects

The evaluation and accreditation criteria are explicit, elaborated in the SQAA's rules and procedures; and explained in detail in the aforementioned Guide to external assessment. Stakeholders find all of these documents and procedures clear, explicit and useful.

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.

2018 review recommendation

ESG 2.6 was a focus area of this targeted review because SQAA was partially compliant with it in the last review of 2018. For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations in their entirety.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to publish all reports, including those with a negative outcome in the case of initial accreditation procedures for reasons of transparency and further development.

Register Committee stated:

While all reports now seem to be available on the website, the next external review of SQAA should analyse in detail whether the new website took full account of the shortcomings identified by the panel.

Evidence

The SAR states that SQAA redesigned and launched its new website in 2018 in terms of content and accessibility. Expert reports are said to be published on the website as soon as the accreditation decision is enforced. The website is said to publish all expert reports, including those from the sample programme evaluation and those with negative accreditation decisions. The panel checked the SQAA website and indeed found all reports published on the Slovenian version of the website. The reports are also easy to find on the site.

In the case of appeals, SAR states that the Appeals Committee's decisions are not published as such, but they are always part of the minutes and decisions of the agency's Council, as the Appeals Committee's decisions are a step in the accreditation and evaluation procedures. The panel checked the website and the documents and verifies that these are published as stated in SAR.

Analysis

The panel found the agency's website useful and easy to navigate. The Slovenian version includes all documents, reports and other information produced or used by the agency, as well as links and connections to other relevant websites and information, such as legislation, links to HEIs and similar information that the public might find useful. The English version included all relevant documents, such as accreditation and evaluation Criteria, Rules, Guidelines, main decisions, etc.

The agency publishes reports in their entirety. Moreover, for each HEI and study programme, one can access and download the expert reports as well as the agency's Council decisions. In addition, SQAA recorded promotional/introductory videos for institutions and programmes. Consequently, as one navigates through the website and searches for information on a particular institution, one can see all relevant info compiled, i.e., basic information about the institution, its programmes, promotional videos, experts' reports, and accreditation decisions. All stakeholders confirmed that they can find all information and documents they need, that the agency's website is a valuable source of overall information on the Slovenian HE system (not only the accreditation and evaluation specific technical documents and reports) and that the website is used as a reference point for stakeholders' questions and information needs about HE in Slovenia.

SQAA organises and promotes its website and the information it contains. For example, SAR reports that the agency launches an annual social media promotional campaign inviting future students, various student organisations and the media to its website. Moreover, the agency cooperates with the Slovenian Student Union to promote the agency's website and resources among potential students so they can use them in their decision-making about what and where to study. Another example is including accreditation decisions in the e-newsletter mentioned before, which draws readers' attention to all available documentation if they are interested in following particular decisions. The overall transparency of the agency's rules and documents, as well as additional information, is commendable.

SQAA publishes information about HEIs and study programmes comprehensively and exhaustively. Reports are easy to find. They are consistent on the Slovenian and English versions of the website. It includes all relevant information in one place (expert reports, accreditation decisions and introductory videos recorded by SQAA). Members of the public can easily access all relevant information.

The website is updated regularly, and all reports are published as soon as the evaluation/accreditation process is complete.

To conclude, the panel would like to note the excellent work by SQAA on reporting.

Panel commendation I

The panel commends SQAA for extending its transparent and useful website to further promotion of published reports and decisions to inform the HE sector via social media and similar channels. Especially cooperation with students is noted as productive and helpful.

Panel conclusion: 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.

2018 review recommendation

For this standard, the panel considered SQAA's operations only for one activity (External (sample) evaluation of a study programme) in line with the Terms of Reference of this targeted review.

In 2018, ENQA review panel found SQAA substantially compliant. The Register Committee found SQAA to be compliant with ESG 2.2.

ENQA's Board stated:

SQAA is recommended to specify its complaints procedure as part of its quality assurance system and communicate this procedure more transparently to the institutions.

Register Committee stated: /

Evidence

As mentioned above, the study programme sample evaluation is designed to be advisory in nature, aiming to promote the quality improvement of study programmes. Therefore, the procedure is not concluded by a formal decision that can be appealed but by issuing recommendations to an HEI for the improvement of the quality of the study programme.

However, for the process of evaluating sample study programmes, HEIs have the same options as in other evaluation and accreditation procedures, i.e., they can object to procedural errors, express their disagreement with appointing a particular expert, propose exclusion of a staff member in the process, and comment the evaluation report before the group of experts finalises it. The complaints procedures follow the General Administration Law for technical process, but the complaints procedures and decision-making are owned by the agency. All of these steps are part of the accreditation criteria, published on the SQAA website and accessible.

Analysis

As an evaluation of study programmes does not end in an accreditation decision but is enhancement- and advisory-oriented, there are no decisions to appeal against. Nevertheless, HEIs have options to

object to other steps in the procedure in the same way as with other accreditation and evaluation processes.

HEIs have options to raise issues of concern where possible and sensible in evaluating sample study programmes. Institutions can state dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process. Based on the SAR and the interviews with HEIs and SQAA staff and bodies, the panel found that the agency staff handle any such concerns professionally and based on the published rules and procedures. The panel heard that stakeholders find the process clear, fit for purpose and appropriate.

During the evaluation of the sample study programmes, applicants have the possibility to object to procedural errors or to express their disagreement in the same way as in the procedure for reaccreditation of an HEI. First, before the appointment of the group of experts, the applicant is informed about the experts to be appointed for the evaluation of the study programme and has the opportunity to communicate their disagreement with them to the agency. If the Agency Council considers that the disagreement is justified (conflict of interest, inappropriateness in terms of fields, etc.), other experts shall be appointed to the group. Second, the applicant has the possibility to propose the exclusion of an expert, a staff member or an Agency Council member throughout the procedure, i.e., until the recommendations to the HEI have been issued. Fourth, the applicant can file a procedural objection (complaint) to the Council or the President of the Council due to the alleged impartiality of the persons who decide or participate in the procedure, and demand their exclusion, even before the Agency Council decides on the procedure. Fifth, the applicant has one month to submit written comments on the evaluation report, which must be assessed by the group of experts and taken into account in the final report. All these options are run following the General Administrative Procedure Act and are communicated to the applicant during the procedure.

The panel discussed the complaints and appeals options in the evaluation of sample programmes with HEIs, the Appeals Committee members and the Council members and found that HEIs in sample programme evaluation can file complaints against all decisions in the process (e.g., in naming experts as mentioned above). HEIs, Appeals Committee and Council members find that there is clear and explicit procedure to appeal akin to other agency's decisions.

Panel conclusion: Compliant

ENHANCEMENT AREAS

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

In 2018, the panel found SQAA to be substantially compliant with ESG 3.3, and the Register Committee found it to be compliant.

Since the last review in 2018, no legal changes have occurred regarding SQAA's role and function. However, the agency acted on the ENQA's panel recommendation and worked to improve its operational independence and the public perception of its independence, which seemed to be one of the biggest issues in the previous review.

Organisational independence

SQAA remained organisationally independent as stipulated by legislative acts and agency statutes. As mentioned, there were no legal changes regarding SQAA's status. Therefore, the 2018 panel's description of evidence still holds. The legislation (ZViS) guarantees the independence of the agency. SAR reports that "Article 51e of the ZViS stipulates that the agency is autonomous and independent in its operation. It is bound by the principles of professionalism, impartiality, legality and political neutrality".

In 2018, the agency attempted to propose a new piece of legislation (a separate Agency Act). Since then, SQAA has worked on drafting this act; however, in 2022, there was an election in Slovenia, and a new government and the minister responsible for HE came into office, delaying the finalisation of the legislation. Recently, the Ministry has established a new group to take forward HE legislation, including legislation on quality. The SQAA Director is a member of this group.

The agency is keen to see new legislation for a number of reasons. These include some housekeeping to the current legislation to align with current practice and allow the agency to undertake accreditation abroad.

All stakeholders the panel consulted believed strongly in the independence of the agency. They both saw this as important and evident in the day-to-day workings of SQAA. Indeed, the SQAA is seen as a leader on the matter of independence across the region and through the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA). In 2020, it conducted a study in cooperation with CEENQA about the independence of agencies in European countries which was well received. The panel interviewed senior staff from three other quality agencies in the region who all testified to the leading role SQAA had played, providing inspiration and practical assistance to agencies where independence was not guaranteed.

Operational independence

One feature of SQAA's independence is its freedom to develop its own methodology for reviews. The agency has undertaken two cycles of institutional reviews. As highlighted earlier in this report, these reviews have remained stable since 2018, with the addition of the Sample Programme Methodology more recently. The agency is now considering how best to respond to the changing face of higher education in areas such as:

- After two cycles of institutional review, should they pursue a targeted institutional review model?
- How do they evaluate micro-credentials – as an institutional approach?
- How do they evaluate the accreditation of joint programmes in the European university initiative?

To help the agency explore the options available to it, the panel ran a workshop for agency staff and staff of other quality agencies from the region. Those present discussed the importance of external QA matching the system's performance, the specific challenges it faces and the context in which it operates, including history, culture, politics and the like. Everyone then discussed three different approaches to targeted review that had been adopted in different quality agencies across Europe.

It was noted that the stakeholders of SQAA found it to be responsive and necessary for the improvement of quality in Slovenian higher education. The independence of the agency was not under question. So SQAA has an opportunity to engage positively with the sector to consider the future, consulting fully on a new approach without calling into question their independent status.

Independence of formal outcomes

In the previous ENQA agency review of SQAA, some stakeholders expressed their concern at the independence of the agency and its ability to make judgements independent of external influence. All stakeholders expressed their confidence in SQAA's ability to make judgements without external influence this time round. The agency had engaged positively with stakeholders over recent years and had established clear processes and procedures to ensure that its judgements were robust and consistent. The panel found that the agency was able to make judgements without interference.

Overall

To enhance the public perception of its independence and integrity, SQAA has taken a number of measures since 2018. First, the SAR reports that SQAA improved its conflict of interest policy and operations for the agency's constituents (staff, council members, appeals committee members and experts) as well as for applicants and stakeholders. Moreover, the agency established an 'integrity team' that monitors its operations, assesses risk, and trains SQAA's constituents on the prevention of conflict of interest. Second, the Council members, experts and Appeals Committee members sign a statement binding them to work in their own capacity and not act as representatives of any organisations. Moreover, the agency organises awareness-raising activities to support understanding these principles. Third, the agency adopted a protocol of conduct in case of undue pressure or attempts to influence experts and prepared a statement of zero tolerance for pressure on council members, employees and experts. The Council's Rules of Procedure also require those present to declare at the start of each session if any attempts to exert influence in a particular matter have been made.

At the site visit, the panel explored the agency's approach to conflict of interest. It was clear that this was rigorous and well-understood. It was also clear that institutions were happy with SQAA's procedures for choosing independent panels, and SQAA staff reported that there had been very few instances of pressure being put on panel members or staff.

SQAA also made an effort to follow the 2018 panel's recommendation to include more international experts in the review procedures. First, the Accreditation Criteria were amended in 2019, introducing a requirement that parts of an accreditation application must be translated into English to better support foreign expert involvement. The Criteria also requires that in the case of accrediting doctoral programmes and reaccreditation of universities, the group of experts must include at least two foreign experts from different countries. Second, in December 2021, it set up a cooperation agreement with ESU to include more international students in evaluation procedures. Third, SQAA set up a register with potential foreign experts for evaluations. At the same time, the SAR recognises challenges with the continuous and sustained inclusion of foreign experts due to the translation costs of documentation that HEIs must submit for evaluation and accreditation procedures.

At the site visit, the panel inquired about the extent of involvement of foreign experts and stakeholders' views on that. It was clear that as a small country with a limited population and small number of institutions, it welcomed the involvement of international experts. HEIs also commended the agency for recently increasing the number of international experts from beyond the Balkans area.

Overall, the panel recognises and appreciates the agency's efforts in advancing its independence. It has put a lot of effort into this. It is seen as a role model for other agencies in the region, and its own stakeholders are strongly supportive of its effective independence. The agency currently relies upon international experts from within the Balkans area. They have plans to expand this, and stakeholders are positive about them doing so. The current international experts from beyond the Balkans feel supported and enjoy their work. However, the agency may have to translate some materials and provide training specifically for international experts to help them to integrate quickly into review panels and understand the Slovenian HE system. The introduction of the annual evaluations of a sample of study programmes has been well received. It would be helpful for the agency to continue to consider new and innovative approaches to external quality assurance, particularly to reduce burden and increase impact. This would further strengthen the agency's important role in Slovenian HE and further enhance its position as an independent evaluator of quality. In support of this, it would also be helpful for the agency to continue to consider its use of data and intelligence to better understand the quality of the Slovenian HE system. The further development of thematic reporting, using such data and intelligence as a starting point, could further enhance the agency's role and perceived independence, particularly if it also reflected recommendations for the Government as well as for institutions.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

Panel commendation 1

The panel commends the agency on the Guide for external assessment since it includes elements of thematic analysis that are presented jointly with the methodological instructions for conducting external QA. It is deemed of high relevance and usefulness by all stakeholders

Panel commendation 2

The panel commends the agency on its internally developed IT system, which is high quality and relevant in supporting the agency with data for research and as a resource to manage labour and processes.

ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

The panel commends the agency on all the formal and informal ways of communication that it has established with its stakeholders over the past years. The agency worked specifically towards strengthening trusted relationships with stakeholders that go beyond the notion of control, which was particularly hard in the national context with reported over-regulation. With consistent and reliable multiple channels of communication, SQAA established a level of valued and reliable partner.

ESG 2.6 Reporting

The panel commends SQAA for extending its transparent and useful website to further promotion of published reports and decisions to inform the HE sector via social media and similar channels. Especially cooperation with students is noted as productive and helpful.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Standard	Judgement	Recommendation
ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis	compliant	The panel recommends that SQAA considers the terminology used for thematic analyses and other kinds of research it conducts.
ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct	compliant	
ESG 2.1 – Consideration of internal quality assurance	compliant	
ESG 2.2 – Designing methodologies fit for purpose	compliant	
ESG 2.3 – Implementing processes	compliant	

ESG 2.4 - Peer-review experts	compliant	
ESG 2.5 – Criteria for outcomes	compliant	
ESG 2.6 – Reporting	compliant	
ESG 2.7 – Complaints and appeals	compliant	
ESG 3.3 – Independence	compliant	

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, SQAA is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

The panel suggests that the agency include suggestions for other stakeholders in addition to institutions in its thematic analysis.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
<i>6.3.2023 – Online meeting</i>			
1	19.1.2023 120 min	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit	<i>All panel</i>
2	6.3.23 10.30 - 12.00	Online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify the agency's changes since the last full review against the ESG and to understand the background and motive of the agency's choice of the self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (next to the overall HE and QA context of the agency)	Head of the Department for Quality and International Cooperation Deputy Head of the Department for Quality and International Cooperation
<i>21.3.2023 (Day 0, pre-visit)</i>			
3	16.30 – onwards	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day 1	<i>All panel</i>
4	As necessary	A pre-visit meeting with the agency's resource person to clarify any remaining questions after the online clarifications meeting	<i>Not needed</i>
<i>22.3.2023 – Day 1</i>			
	9.30 – 10.00	Review panel's private meeting	
5	10.00 – 10.45	Meeting with the Director and the Chair of the Council	Director of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency Chair of the Council of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency
	10.45 – 11.00	Review panel's private discussion	
6	11.00 – 11.45	Meeting with representatives from the Senior Management Team	Head of the Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			Head of the Department of Analytics and Information Technology Head of General Affairs Department
	11.45 – 12.00	Review panel's private discussion	
7	12.00 – 12.45	Meeting with Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation (excluding the Head) and the General Affairs Department	Four people from Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation One person from the General Affairs Department
	12.45 – 13.45	Lunch (panel only)	
8	13.45 – 14.30	Meeting with the Department of Analytics and Information (excluding the Head)	Entire department
	14.30 – 14.45	Review panel's private discussion	
9	14.45 – 15.30	Meeting with the SQAA Council Members excluding the Chair	Representative of the Rector's conference Representative of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia Representative of independent HEIs Former Member of the Council (Representative of vocational colleges) Representative organisation of students
	15.30 – 15.45	Review panel's private discussion	
10	15.45 – 16.15	Meeting with the Appeals Committee	Three members
	16.15 – 16.30	Review panel's private discussion	
11	16.30 – 17.00	Meeting with representatives of Vocational Colleges	Head of Vocational College, Novo mesto

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			<p>Head of Vocational College, Gea College</p> <p>Head of Vocational College, Biotechnical Educational Centre Ljubljana (BIC Ljubljana)</p> <p>Head of Vocational College, Academia d.o.o.</p> <p>Head of the development of the Association of Vocational Colleges</p> <p>Student VET representative</p>
	17.00 - 17.15	Review panel's private discussion	
12	17.15 - 18.00	Enhancement area session with SQAA Director, Council Chair, and Senior management team	<p>Director of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency</p> <p>Chair of the Council of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (Employer's representative)</p> <p>Head of the Department for Quality Assurance and International Cooperation</p> <p>Head of the Department of Analytics and Information Technology</p> <p>Head of General Affairs Department</p>
13	18.00 – 18.30	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2	
23.3.2023 – Day 2			
	9.00 – 10.00	Review panel's private meeting	
14	10.00 – 10.45	Meeting with ministry representatives (both, responsible for HE and vocational colleges)	<p>Acting Director-General Higher Education Directorate, Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation</p> <p>Head of Higher Education Division, Ministry of Higher</p>

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			Education, Science and Innovation Higher Vocational Education Division, Ministry of Education
	10.45 – 11.00	Review panel's private discussion	
15	11.00 – 11.45	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/ HEI representatives	Vice-Rector for Internationalisation and Quality Assurance, University of Ljubljana Chair of the Quality Assessment Commission, University of Maribor Dean of Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska Vice-Dean of Faculty of Health Sciences Head of the Doctoral study programme, International School for Business and Social Studies
	11.45 – 12.00	Review panel's private discussion	
16	12.00 – 12.45 45 min	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana University of Maribor University of Nova Gorica Alma Mater Europaea
	12.45 – 14.00	Lunch (panel only)	
17	14.00 – 14.45	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool	Reviewers' reps, including students (from Slovenia and from abroad) Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Maribor Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Maribor

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			<p>Student expert representative Law School, Leiden University Arts Academy of the University of Split Student expert representative</p>
	14.45 – 15.00	Review panel's private discussion	
18	15.00 – 15.45	A meeting with the working group that was preparing the draft legislation for SQAA (nominated by the Ministry)	<p>Head of the working group, (former) representative of the Ministry for higher education Deputy Head of the working group, representative of the Agency Representative of the University of Ljubljana Representative of the University of Primorska Representative of the Alma Mater Europaea Representative of students</p>
	15.45 – 16.00	Review panel's private discussion	
19	16.00 – 17.00	Meeting with various stakeholders (session focused on the Independence of SQAA as the enhancement area)	<p>Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana (former Rector of University of Ljubljana) Dean at the School of Humanities, University of Nova Gorica President of Student organisation of University of Maribor Vice Head of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA, Ukraine) Secretary at the National Entity for Accreditation and Quality</p>

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
			Assurance in Higher Education (NEAQA, Serbia) Assistant Director of the Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ACQAHE, Montenegro)
	17.00 – 17.15	Review panel's private discussion	
20	17.15 – 18.00	Private HEIs	Former Vice-rector for education, University of Nova Gorica Dean of Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Novo mesto Vice-dean for education, Faculty of Polymer Technology President of the Association of private HEIs Secretary of the Association of private HEIs Director of the Environmental Protection College Dean of the Ljubljana School of Business (B2) Assistant Director, Faculty of Commercial and Business Sciences, ZOOM Student representative of private HEIs
21	18.00 – 18.30 30 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions	
24.3.2023 – Day 3			
22	9.30 – 10.30	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	
23	10.30 – 11.00	Meeting with CEO and other agency staff to clarify any pending issues	

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
24	11.00 – 12.30	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings	
	12.30 – 13.30	Lunch (panel only)	
25	13.30 – 14.00	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	As decided by the agency

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

Targeted review of Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) against the ESG

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

The present Terms of Reference were agreed between SQAA (applicant), ENQA (coordinator) and EQAR.

(July 2022)

1. Background

Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 01/06/2013 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration based on a targeted external review against *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

SQAA has been a member of ENQA since 2015 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

SQAA is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- Accreditation of international joint programmes
- Accreditation of new study programmes
- Assessing the requirements for entry of transnational higher education (THE) to the SQAA register
- External evaluation of vocational colleges
- Extraordinary evaluation of higher education institutions
- Extraordinary evaluation of study programmes
- External (sample) evaluation of a study programme
- Initial accreditation of higher education institutions
- Re-accreditation of higher education institutions
- Transformation of a higher education institution
- Notifications of international joint programmes and programmes of the international associations of universities accredited abroad

All these activities will be included on the agency's profile on the EQAR website and linked to DEQAR database. NB: The agency may not upload reports from other activities to DEQAR.

Should anything change between the time of application and the review i.e. any type of changes that may affect the registered agency's substantial compliance with the ESG, the agency is expected to inform EQAR at the earliest convenience⁴.

The following activities of the applicant are outside the scope of the ESG:

- Minimum criteria for election to the titles of higher education teacher, researcher and higher education associate at higher education institutions
- Advisory services

These activities are not relevant to the application for renewal on EQAR.

2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

This review will evaluate the extent to which SQAA continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support SQAA's application to EQAR.

The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

2.1 Focus areas

- A) Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the Register Committee's last renewal decision:
 - a. ESG 2.6 – Reporting;
 - b. ESG 3.4 – Thematic analysis;
 - c. ESG 3.6 – Internal quality assurance and professional conduct
- B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following activities:
 - a. External (sample) evaluation of a study programme;
- C) ~~Standards affected by other types of substantive changes:~~ n/a
- D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;
- E) Selected enhancement area:
 - a. ESG 3.3 Independence

⁴ See EQAR's policy on reporting changes <https://www.eqar.eu/register/guide-for-agencies/reporting-and-renewal/>

- F) Other matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG (if any).

These issues should be investigated by the review panel as far as possible, providing an analysis and conclusion on the ESG standard(s) concerned.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted in line with the requirements of *the EQAR Procedures for Applications* and *the Policy on Targeted Reviews*, and following the methodology described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Agreement on the Terms of Reference between EQAR, SQAA and The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- Self-assessment by SQAA including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to SQAA;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Analysis of the final review report and decision-making by the EQAR Register Committee;
- Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board;
- Attendance to the online follow-up seminar.

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to SQAA during the past 5 years, and conversely SQAA has not provided any remunerated or unremunerated services to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of 4 members including an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member and one other expert. At least two of the four members is from another country.

At least one panel member should be a quality assurance professional that is currently employed by a QA agency and has been engaged in quality assurance within the past five years. When requested by the agency under review or when

considered particularly pertinent, other stakeholders (for example, a representative of the labour market) may be included in addition to the four panel members. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and one as the review secretary. 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. At least two panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

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.

Once appointed, The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) will inform EQAR about the appointed panel members.

3.3 Self-assessment by SQAA, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

SQAA is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- Self-assessment includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

- a description of the self-assessment process and the production of the SAR;
- a description of changes occurred within the agency since the last full review, including any eventual changes in the higher education system and quality assurance system in which the agency predominantly operates, the agency's structure, funding, its list of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG, as well as the changes in the agency's quality assurance activities abroad (where relevant);

- a section that addresses the focus areas of the review, including standards that were considered to be partially compliant with the ESG in the last full review as well as ESG 2.1 and one self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (see 2.1 Focus areas);
- a SWOT analysis of the agency as a whole;
- for each of the individual standards enlisted above (see section 2) a consideration of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal (if applicable).

The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which SQAA fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and continues to meet the ESG and thus the requirements for EQAR registration.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the review coordinator, 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 coordinator will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted 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.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule considering the aspects included under the focus area (as defined under point 2.1 of the Terms of Reference).

The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit. The approved schedule shall be given to SQAA at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The site visit should enable the review panel to explore how the agency has addressed the standards where it has been found to be partially compliant (if the case), aspects of substantive change, consideration of internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1) and the self-selected ESG standard(s) for enhancement. The panel will include extra time during the site-visit to address any other arising issues (if the case) that might have an impact on the agency's compliance with the ESG.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the agency.

Prior to the physical site visit, the panel attends a joint briefing call between the panel, The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and EQAR to clarify the review expectations and address any possible arising matters.

In advance of the site visit (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.

3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR⁵.

The external report will present the facts and analysis reflecting the reality at the time of review. This will form the main basis for the Register Committee's decision making.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language. After panel has considered coordinator's feedback, the report will go to the agency for comment on factual accuracy. If SQAA chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report.

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by SQAA and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel will sign off on the final version of the external review report. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) will provide to SQAA the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

⁵ See here: <https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg>

4. Publication and use of the report

SQAA will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Agency Review Committee has validated the report. Prior to the final validation of the report, the ENQA Agency Review Committee may 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. The report will also be published on the EQAR website together with the decision on registration, regardless of the outcome.

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. 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.

5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA membership

The agency will submit the review report via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency will also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), the Declaration of Honour and any other relevant documents to the application to EQAR (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report).

EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in Oct/Nov 20223 (tbc). The Register Committee's final judgement on the agency's compliance with the ESG as a whole can either be substantially compliant (approval of the application) or not substantially compliant (rejection of the application). In case of a positive decision (substantially compliant with the ESG), the registration is renewed for a further five years (from the date of the review report).

The decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board will take place after EQAR Register Committee decision.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is 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.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	July 2022
Appointment of review panel members	Sept/Oct 2022
Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by SQAA	1 December 2022
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	Mid December 2022
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January 2023
Briefing of review panel members	End January 2023
Review panel site visit	Early March 2023
Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator	End April 2023
Factual check of the review report by the SQAA	May 2023
Statement of SQAA to review panel (if applicable)	May 2023
Submission of review report to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)	June 2023
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	End June/Oct 2023
EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by SQAA	Oct/Nov 2023
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	December 2023

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESG	<i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i>
ESU	European Student Union
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
QA	quality assurance
SAR	self-assessment report
SEG	self-evaluation group
SQAA	Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY SQAA

- SQAA self-evaluation report

DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATION REQUESTED BY THE PANEL AND PROVIDED BY THE SQAA

- A number of draft reports by experts in English language
- SQAA Work Plan for 2023
- Statistics on the newsletters and links to newsletters
- Statistics on regular meetings with stakeholders since 2018 and themes discussed (list of events and meetings, such as annual conferences)
- Statistics on the Director's visits to HEIs and themes discussed (list of visits and general themes that were discussed)
- New international cooperation resulting from the Director's visits to agencies abroad (list of what kind of cooperation was established as a result of these visits)
- A short contextual explanation on the Constitutional Court ruling that SAR mentioned was possibly endangering SQAA in the past (what was the issue)
- A list of which institutions that had undergone sample evaluations since 2019 as per p.18 of SAR
- Any evidence on how stakeholders appreciate the eNAKVIS, NAKVIS website, YouTube and Twitter – statistics, but also any communication about it
- In the previous ENQA review, the panel expected a more open and constructive dialogue with stakeholders (the Government and HEIs). SQAA responded so that the SQAA Council members are included in evaluators' training, evaluation of sample programmes, visits of HEIs with the Director, training of the new council members about their role, etc. Could you please provide some statistics and information on this, including how new Council members are trained?

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

- ENQA agency review report 2018
- EQAR Renewal of Registration 2018
- ENQA Reconfirmation of membership 2018
- SQAA Follow-up report from agency review by ENQA 2020
- ENQA letter on SQAA follow-up report for the 2018 ENQA review 2020
- ENQA response to New University about its complaint against SQAA sent to ENQA on 28 October 2020
- SQAA website
- SQAA YouTube channel

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW 2023

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Targeted Review of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA), undertaken in 2023.

enqa.

European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education