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Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije  
za kakovost v visokem šolstvu

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Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education

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Our reference: 511-1/2014/6  
Ljubljana, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

Your reference: Your letter with the decision on 18 March 2015

**Subject: Your request for subsequent follow-up report**

Dear Mr. Walsh,

In your letter of 18 March 2015 to SQAA you kindly requested a subsequent follow-up report which we should submit within two years (by March 2017) based on the recommendations from the evaluation panel.

It is very important to mention that two substantial changes have occurred in the higher education which affect the Slovenian higher education area. The first change is the **adoption of revised ESG 2015** in Erevan, Armenia, in May 2015 by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area. The second substantial change is the long-lasting preparation and the adoption of the **amendments to the Slovenian Higher Education Act (HEA)** in December 2016.

Therefore it is appropriate at the beginning to briefly describe the **novelties in the Slovenian Higher Education legislation**. These arise from the longterm »Resolution on National Programme of Higher Education 2011-2020« adopted by the Slovenian Parliament in April 2011. They are designed to enable appropriate interaction of higher education with the environment, providing graduates with relevant skills and competences for effective transition to the labour market or academic community, and therefore provide well-educated and appropriate graduates.





In order to meet these objectives and in line with some trends in the European higher education area (for example - Switzerland, the Netherlands, Flanders, Germany, etc.), the novelties also provide a sort of solution for greater flexibility and evolution of study programmes and research. They also reiterate and emphasize the autonomy of the higher education institutions.

Their intention is to focus on the so-called external institutional evaluation/accreditation with the emphasis on assessing a higher education institution as a whole, its governance, evaluating and auditing only selected study programmes and collecting appropriate and fit-for-purpose information from their annual self-evaluation reports. Evaluation visits to higher education institutions (and faculties) are compulsory and are carried out in two phases – as initial and as follow-up visits. We consider that these activities will guarantee in particular the quality of the higher institution as a whole as well as its internal quality assurance system and quality culture. The necessary condition for this is properly established, effective and operational internal quality assurance system according to ESG Part 1 at the higher education institution.

Apart from the responsibility of external institutional evaluation (two site visits) the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) will be in charge of the initial accreditation of new study programmes. At the same time safety mechanisms will be put in place (among these I have already mentioned the initial accreditation of study programmes which will remain under the jurisdiction of SQAA) including the traceability of substantial changes of already accredited study programmes, which will be monitored by SQAA; accreditation procedures of transformations and relocations of already accredited higher education institutions; extraordinary institutional and programme evaluations and sample (cluster) audits of study programmes. Together they shall assure compliance with the relevant quality standards. In addition, the accreditation period has now been reduced from seven to five years. The autonomy of higher education institutions regarding the study programmes including their design, approval and development is at the same time much more respected.

A special provision was introduced for joint study programmes within the European Union. It sets out the possibility to consider the results of a foreign accreditation process if the study programme has been accredited by one of the quality assurance agencies which are members of EQAR.

In this context, an important objective is given by the amended legislation: The activities of SQAA will to a greater extent focus on counselling, providing system analyses and research, policy-making. Our counselling will pay special attention to enhancing the quality of study programmes, research and educational institutions as a whole. Importance is however subtracted from oversight and inspection. To compensate for this novelty, a reinforced mechanism of sample (cluster) audits and



extraordinary audits of study programmes as well as follow-up procedures within institutional accreditations will be further designed by the SQAA and put in place. These reports of sample audits will be used solely for improving the quality culture and quality assurance/enhancement procedures at the higher education institutions.

The above proposed system has been adopted in December 2016 and will be put in operation in April 2017. It is currently being further developed and specified by the SQAA.

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Since all evaluation and accreditation procedures in Slovenia are carried out according to the General Administrative Procedure Act, SQAA at present is preparing all the required bye-laws. Also HE Act is stating that SQAA determines procedures and criteria for external evaluations and accreditations and other criteria and regulations. It is needless to say that we asked all the stakeholders (employees at the agency, our team of experts-evaluators, HE institutions, students and at the end the Ministry) for comments, views and opinions. However, we anticipate that the final decision on the bye-laws will be adopted by the Council of the agency at the end of March 2017.

In 2016 the SQAA together with Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, and the Government of Slovenia was under the review of Court of Auditors of Republic of Slovenia. The title of revision was: Methods of evaluation, accreditation and the granting of concessions in the Slovenian Higher Education 2010-2013, 120 pp. The revision ended on 19 Jan 2017.

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The explanations for the requested recommendations for improvement listed by the ENQA panel in their Report of the External Review of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) (January 2015) are as follows:

**ESG 2.1: SQAA might wish to provide institutions with more guidance for the preparation of the annual self-evaluation reports in order to cater for a more efficient integration into the agency's activities.**

As mentioned previously all bye-laws including *Criteria for the accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes (=Criteria)* are under preparation. The changes of Slovenian HE Act became valid on 15 Dec 2016 <https://www.uradni-list.si/glasilo-uradni-list-rs/vsebina/2016-01-3209?sop=2016-01-3209> and the proposed time in which SQAA should adapt the corresponding bye-laws to the above ammendments is 15 March 2017.

At present there are 910 accredited "Bologna" study programmes in Slovenia and the site visits by the SQAA expert panels (with the representatives of



the SQAA staff) to the HE institutions were very frequent. At those visits (preparatory and regular visits) special attention was devoted to the structure and content of the self-evaluation report. The institutions are now aware that the effective internal quality assurance system and a properly adopted annual self-evaluation report with the SWOT analysis are the basis for a successful visit of the panel as well as is the real foundation for the action plan of the institutions. All these results in the positive final report. The SQAA council also regularly calls on higher education institutions to submit detailed action plans on quality assurance and enhancement prior to adopting the final decision on the accreditation of a study programme of a higher education institution.

**ESG 2.3: SQAA should strengthen its efforts to develop a shared understanding of criteria by developing and publishing official interpretation of certain criteria and regulations.**

Nearly the same findings and recommendations were given in the report of Court of Auditors of Republic of Slovenia. Therefore, the newly prepared *Criteria* contain both standards and detailed guidelines (according to and following revised ESG Part 1). In this manner, they will provide official explanation and guidelines how these standards are assessed, to be understood, achieved and possibly exceeded. The *Criteria* will be adopted by the SQAA Council at the end of March 2017.

**ESG 2.6: SQAA should establish a formalized follow-up procedure as regular part of the reviews. This is particularly important if the move to institutional reviews only materializes.**

The recommendation ESG 2.6 is now introduced in the amendment of the Slovenian Higher Education Act – Article 51.r . The evaluation now consists of two visits to the HE institution, namely:

"The group of experts performs the first visit and drafts a report on its findings together with any proposals for a more accurate assessment of individual areas of the HE institution on the second visit, mainly related to the organization, implementation, modification and self-evaluation of certain study programmes within three months of their appointment. The SQAA Council processes the initial report on the findings within one month of its receipt and decides on proposals for a second visit.

The second visit takes place three months after the decision of the SQAA Council. The second visit is an in-depth assessment of the scope of the institution or the study programmes following the decision of the council. There is an oral presentation on findings on the last day of the visit. The higher education institution may, after hearing the findings, react and explain the situation. The panel has to consider any observations when drafting the evaluation report.



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A month after the second visit the panel creates the evaluation report based on the assessment of the higher education institution, on self-evaluation report and other documents. The evaluation report is sent to the higher education institution which can submit its comments within one month of its receipt. If the higher education institution does not comment on the evaluation report, the report becomes final. If it comments on the report, the expert panel, after assessing the merits of the comments, prepares the final evaluation report within one month from the receipt of the comments.

The evaluation report should contain an assessment of compliance with the criteria for accreditation and external evaluation of the higher education institution and other ingredients that are specifically determined by the SQAA Council."

Should you need any more information we would be very glad to assist. We want to stress that we are now in the course of preparing and adapting new *Criteria* following your recommendations and the ones of the Court of Auditors of Republic of Slovenia.

We shall be able to assess the final outcome of this whole exercise (transfer from institutional/programme evaluation to institutional) in due course.

However, we shall closely look at the whole procedure and collect all the possible information and also adequately react.

With very good wishes,

Yours faithfully,

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