

Croatian Quality Assurance System in Higher Education and Science

Historical overview

Systematic quality assurance in higher education and science in Croatia began in 2010 with the procedure of re-accreditation of Croatian higher education institutions (HEIs), conducted by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE). Prior to 2010, similar evaluations have been conducted in Croatia, but they had never been systematically carried out for all HEIs, by using the same criteria. In the period 2010-2016, ASHE has re-accredited all public and private HEIs in Croatia in accordance with the national regulations, but also in line with The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

When ASHE became only national body responsible for carrying out external evaluation in higher education and science in 2009, by the *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education*, it emphasized the independence of the Agency's work and removed the obstacles that prevented full compliance with the ESG and membership in main European QA associations (ENQA, EQAR).

QA procedures

A specific feature of Croatian QA system is that it involves not only evaluation in higher education but also in science. The main reason for this are the legal regulations governing higher education and science according to which each university is both a teaching and scientific institution. Because of it, when evaluating quality, both activities have to be evaluated.

For the purpose of ensuring independence and enhancing public confidence in the evaluation procedures, foreign experts are involved in all QA procedures conducted by ASHE.

ASHE also develops and continuously upgrade information systems and tools for collecting data on higher education and science in Croatia within evaluation procedures, as well as those for organisation and monitoring evaluation procedures. Through continuous monitoring of all phases of each evaluation process, the Agency has developed an enviable database of evaluation outcomes as well as experts involved in the procedures.

All reports from QA procedures in higher education and science are available on ASHE website upon completion of the procedure, in Croatian, but also in English. QA reports from evaluations in higher education are also available in DEQAR database.

The external quality assurance procedures carried out by the Agency are as follows:

1) Initial accreditation

▪ *Institutional*

- for obtaining a Licence for Performing Higher Education Activity;
- for obtaining a Licence for Scientific Activity

Outcomes: Accreditation recommendation - granted/denied

▪ *Programme*

- evaluation of a proposed new study programme;

Outcome: Accreditation recommendation – positive/negative

2) Re-accreditation

- *of Higher education institutions*
- *of Scientific institutions*

All public and private higher education institutions, public scientific institutions and other scientific organizations founded by the Republic of Croatia, as well as private scientific organizations and legal entities financed from the national budget, undergo a periodical re-accreditation every 5 years. Private scientific organizations and other legal entities funded from the national budget undergo a periodical re-accreditation only for the parts funded from the national budget.

Outcome: Accreditation recommendation - granted/denied/letter of expectation;

3) Thematic evaluation

- Carried out by the Agency on official duty (on the basis of a decision by Accreditation Council), at the suggestion of the Minister, the subject of evaluation or the student union of the higher education institution.

Outcome: a report

4) Audit

- Procedure looking into degree of development and efficiency of the internal quality assurance system (QAS) of an institution being audited.
 - If internal QAS is effective, ASHE issues a certificate to HEI;
 - If internal QAS is deficient, ASHE may initiate re-audit.

Outcome: a report with recommendations for improvement and a certificate issued by the Agency

5) Additional evaluations conducted by ASHE – upon demand

- *Re-accreditation of part of the activity of higher education institutions;*
- *Feasibility of the public financing of study programmes of public universities;*
- *Evaluation of amendments to approved study programmes if amendments are greater than 20 %;*
- *Re-accreditation of postgraduate doctoral study programmes.*

Further improvements to the QA system in Croatia are planned through the introduction of the European Approach in the evaluation of joint study programmes, as well as the regulation of cross-border evaluation opportunities, where institutions could choose among EQAR agencies in QA.

Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE)

www.azvo.hr

The Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) was established in 2004 by the *Croatian Government Decree on Establishment of ASHE* as a public body providing administrative and technical support to the national councils in charge of higher education and science in Croatia. In 2009, by the *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education*, a significant step towards development of quality assurance was made by appointing the ASHE a sole national authority for quality assurance in higher and education in Croatia. As of 2009, ASHE autonomously and independently performs activities within the scope stipulated by the Quality Act and other regulations, complying with European standards and guidelines and international practice in the field of quality assurance in science and higher education.

Becoming a full member of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education), both in 2011, ASHE proved its reliability as a quality assurance agency working in accordance with the ESG in the European Higher Education Area. In addition to ENQA and EQAR, ASHE is a member of several other QA networks (e.g. ECA, INQAAHE, CEENQA, CHEA International), and has ISO 9001 certified quality management system.

The **main regulations defining the jurisdiction and scope of work of the ASHE** are:

- Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education;
- Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education;
- Act on Recognition of Foreign Higher Education Qualifications;
- Ordinance on the Content of a Licence and Conditions for Issuing a Licence for Performing Higher Education Activity, Carrying out a Study Programme and Re-Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions;
- Ordinance on Conditions for Issuing Licence for Scientific Activity, Conditions for Re-accreditation of Scientific Organisations and Content of Licence;
- The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The governing bodies of ASHE are the Management Board, Director and the Accreditation Council. ASHE bodies comprise representatives of all stakeholders in higher education and science, including students, representatives of professional associations, non-profit organizations and the business community.

ASHE Management Board appoints and discharges **ASHE's Director** on the basis of a public competition. The Board consists of a chair and eight members appointed by the Croatian Parliament for a four-year term. Chair and two members are proposed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, one member is proposed by the Rectors' Conference, one member by the Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, two members are proposed by the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development and one member by the Croatian Student Council. ASHE appoints one member of the Management Board from among the ranks of its employees.

ASHE Accreditation Council is the Agency's expert panel, composed of 11 members appointed for a four-year term by the ASHE Management Board, upon the recommendation of ASHE's Director. The members of the Council are nominated at the request of ASHE by the following bodies: Rectors' Conference, Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, Croatian Chamber of Economy, Croatian Student Council, National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development and scientific institutes, as well as academics through a public call. In order to secure transparency and public confidence, ASHE Accreditation Council also includes (as associate members) a representative of a civil society organisation from the area of higher education and science as well as one foreign expert member.

ASHE scope of work:

- 1) External QA procedures/evaluations in science and higher education;
 - Initial accreditation;
 - Re-accreditation;
 - Audit;
 - Thematic evaluations.
- 2) Recognition of foreign HE qualifications through the National ENIC/NARIC Office, which also has the role of a contact point for regulated professions in Croatia;
- 3) Monitoring and administrating the *National Information System for Applications to Higher Education Institutions* for enrolment to HE study programmes in the Republic of Croatia, via the Central Applications Office;
- 4) Administrative and consultative support to various national bodies;
 - National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technology Development,
 - Council of Polytechnics and Colleges,
 - Ethics Committee in Science and Higher Education,
 - 7 scientific area councils,
 - 23 field committees for all scientific fields and areas in Croatia, in charge of procedures of appointment of scientists and teachers to scientific grades,
 - 7 field committees in charge of procedures of appointment of teachers to teaching grades.

In addition to above mentioned, ASHE participates in the work of various HE quality assurance international associations and networks and provides consultative and educational support related to the improvement of both external and internal quality assurance system at HEIs.

Organization structure of ASHE consists of:

- Director's office,
- Accreditation Council,
- Internal Quality Office,
- Directorate for Higher Education,
- Directorate for Science,
- International Cooperation,
- Central Application Office,
- General Administration Department.

ASHE employs a team of 73 people of which 15 are exclusively involved in QA activities in higher education and science.