

**External review of the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE)
by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)**

**Annex I: TRIPARTITE TERMS OF REFERENCE BETWEEN ASHE, ENQA AND
EQAR**
November 2020

I. Background and context

ASHE was established in 2004 by the Government of the Republic of Croatia as the only institution tasked with accreditation procedures in higher education and research in the Republic of Croatia. 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 is funded from the state budget. The mission of ASHE is to promote the importance of quality assurance in higher education and science with the aim of continuous quality improvement of higher education institutions, scientific organisations and the overall Croatian system of science and higher education and its recognisability within the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, while encouraging the society's sustainable development.

ASHE performs external quality assurance procedures, professional recognition of foreign higher education qualifications, collecting and processing data on Croatian higher education, science and related systems, providing information and unifying data on the conditions of enrolment to higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia, and supporting the activities of a number of national bodies. It is currently the only agency whose accreditation recommendations are accepted by the Croatian Government for Croatian institutions and programmes.

In 2015 it launched an evaluation procedure in Slovenia, at the request of a private HEI as well as an evaluation procedure of the University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2017. In year 2020 ASHE received legal interpretation of the national HE laws from Croatian Ministry of Science and Education and their support for ASHE to apply European Approach to evaluation of joint studies.

The external quality assurance procedures carried out by ASHE in higher education are initial accreditation and reaccreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions, and audit of higher education institutions. In addition to this, ASHE performs thematic evaluations.

Initial accreditation is an evaluation procedure carried out for the new HEIs, new study programmes by private higher education institutions (universities, polytechnics and colleges) and public polytechnics and colleges and also for the new scientific organizations established and/or financed by state. In this process the fulfilment of necessary accreditation criteria is checked.

Re-accreditation of higher education institutions is an external evaluation procedure carried out in five-year cycles, and is mandatory for all public and private higher education institutions in Croatia. It assesses compliance with necessary requirements (academic threshold) and provides a quality grade. The goal of the re-accreditation is to determine whether the evaluated institution meets the necessary criteria prescribed by national standards and ESG.

Re-accreditation of the Part of the Activities of Higher Education Institutions (Re-accreditation of PhD study programmes)

Re-accreditation of a part of the activity is an external evaluation procedure which assesses the quality of a part of the activity of the higher education institution.

In the previous period, as a procedure for re-accreditation of part of the activity, re-accreditation of postgraduate doctoral studies was carried out. It was initiated as an extraordinary reaccreditation, at the request of the Minister. It was an external evaluation procedure which aims to ensure that the higher education qualifications that award the academic title of "doctor of science" (PhD) reflect study programmes of high quality that are internationally comparable. In addition to checking compliance with the legal requirements, the procedure includes an external quality assessment carried out by an international expert panel, and issuance of recommendations for each individual programme.

Through this quality assurance procedure, ASHE ensures that Croatian doctoral study programmes - and the qualifications they offer - satisfy domestic and international threshold criteria of academic quality.

Re-accreditation of postgraduate university doctoral (PhD) study programmes conducted by ASHE from 2016 till 2018 is finished. This type of re-accreditation will not be carried out cyclically, but the implementation of recommendations will be monitored through follow-up procedures.

Audit of a higher education institutions is a systematic, periodic procedure used to assess whether the internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution is effective and developed according to ESG and the ASHE Audit Criteria. The purpose of audit is to encourage continuous development of HEIs' internal quality assurance and quality culture. It is carried out in five-year cycle.

Thematic evaluation in higher education Thematic evaluation in higher education is carried out either on official duty and according to the annual plan of the ASHE, or following a request from the minister, higher education institution, or student council of the higher education institution. It is carried out in order to check, evaluate and develop the quality of the HE institution and/or study program within the scope of specific themes. It is performed as a "tailor made" procedure meaning that for each individual thematic evaluation ASHE develop separate procedure, specific methodology and detailed criteria depending on the theme of evaluation. Thematic evaluation does not end with a formal decision in terms of making the accreditation recommendation or the decision of the Ministry, but the result of this procedure is a report with an analysis forwarded to the applicant and published on the ASHE web. In the past period (last six years) ASHE has not received any request for

thematic evaluation, therefore there are no any recent outcomes from this type of evaluation.

ASHE has been a member of ENQA since 2011 and is applying for ENQA renewal of membership. ASHE has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2011 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration.

2. Purpose and scope of the evaluation

This review will evaluate the extent to which ASHE fulfils the requirements of Parts 2 and 3 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of ASHE should be reconfirmed and to EQAR to support ASHE application to the register.

2.1 Activities of ASHE within the scope of the ESG

In order for ASHE to apply for ENQA membership and for registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities of ASHE that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is independent of whether the activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA and whether they are obligatory or voluntary in nature.

The following activities of ASHE have to be addressed in the external review:

- Reaccreditation of higher education institutions
- Re-accreditation of the Part of the Activities of Higher Education Institutions (Reaccreditation of PhD study programmes)
- Audit of higher education institutions
- Initial accreditation (of higher education institutions and programmes).
- Thematic evaluations*.

**This activity will be addressed in a general way only, considering ad-hoc character and that none have taken place in the last 5 years.*

3. The review process

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

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation and agreement on the Terms of Reference for the review between ASHE, ENQA and EQAR;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Notification of EQAR about the appointed panel;
- Self-assessment by ASHE including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;

- A site visit by the review panel to ASHE;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Decision making by the EQAR Register Committee on the agency's registration on EQAR;
- Follow-up of the panel's and/or the ENQA Board's recommendations by the agency, including a voluntary progress visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

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

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member 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 ASHE with the list of suggested experts and their respective curricula vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards the ASHE review.

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

ASHE is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall consider the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part 2 and 3) addressed individually, and considerations of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the

ENQA Board's membership decision letter and the instances of partial compliance noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal. All agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.

- The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which ASHE fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat which has four weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case 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 reject the report and ask for a revised version within two weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 EUR will be charged to the agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A site visit by the review panel

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

The review panel will be assisted in a site visit by the ENQA Review Coordinator.

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 or the granting or reconfirmation of ENQA membership.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each standard of part 2 and 3 of the ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language, and it will be then submitted to ASHE usually within 10 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If ASHE 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 ASHE and finalise and submit the document to ENQA.

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

When preparing the report, the review panel should also 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 consideration of the Register Committee of the agency's application to EQAR¹.

For the purpose of applying for ENQA membership, ASHE is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which ASHE expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be taken into consideration by the Board together with the final evaluation report when deciding on the agency's membership.

4. Follow-up process and publication of the report

ASHE will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has approved the report. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. As part of ENQA Agency Review follow-up activities, ASHE commits to react on the review recommendations and submit a follow-up report to the ENQA Board within the timeframe indicated in the Board's decision on membership. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report could be complemented by a small-scale progress visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered to be of particular importance or a challenge to ASHE. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or judgment of compliance of the agency with the ESG. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

5. Use of the report

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

The review report is used by the ENQA Board for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether ASHE can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The report is also used as a basis for the Register Committee's decision on the agency's registration on EQAR. The review process is thus designed to serve these two purposes. However, the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by ENQA. Once submitted to ENQA and until it is approved by its Board, the report may not be used or relied upon by ASHE, the panel, or any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. The approval of the report is independent of the decision of the ENQA Board on membership.

¹ See here: https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2020/09/RC_12_1_UseAndInterpretationOfTheESG_v3_0.pdf

For the purposes of EQAR registration, the agency will submit the review report (once approved by the ENQA Board) via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency should also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), a Declaration of Honour, full curriculum vitae (CVs) of all review panel members and any other relevant documents to the application (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report, updates). EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in March 2022.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	November 2020
Appointment of review panel members	January 2021
Self-assessment completed	15 April 2021
Pre-screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	End-April 2021
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	April 2021
Briefing of review panel members	May 2021
Review panel site visit	Mid-June 2021
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA Review Coordinator for pre-screening	End-August 2021
Draft of evaluation report to ASHE	September 2021
Statement of ASHE to review panel if necessary	October 2021
Submission of final report to ENQA	November 2021
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board	December 2021
Publication of report	January 2022
EQAR Register Committee meeting	March 2022