

ASHE Report on Changes and Improvements Carried Out in the Period Following ENQA's External Review of ASHE

The most significant change to have taken place since ENQA's external review of ASHE is the adoption of the new *Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science*. The Act was adopted in December 2022 and has brought about the following main changes to ASHE activities and external evaluation procedures:

- Changes to the composition of the Accreditation Council which permit **greater stakeholder diversity**; for instance, the new Accreditation Council includes two representatives of the Conference of Polytechnics and two student representatives (from a public and a private higher education institution). The manner of appointing the ASHE Management Board has also been changed (pursuant to the new Act, the members and the president are appointed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia). Also, the Act stipulates the establishment of a **Complaints Committee** and a **Follow-up Committee**, which both include a student representative, among other members.
- The Act defines the following as compulsory external evaluation procedures: the **initial accreditation of study programmes**, **initial accreditation of higher education institutions** and **re-accreditation of higher education institutions**. The initial accreditation of study programmes is a requirement for all new study programmes proposed by both public and private higher education institutions (previously public universities had the option of self-accrediting new study programmes). The external quality assurance audit is no longer conducted; however, the second cycle of external evaluations has been completed and all polytechnics have been audited in accordance with ENQA's previous recommendations.
- In accreditation procedures, **it is ASHE that makes the final decisions**, i.e. decides on the outcome of the procedure, as opposed to issuing a recommendation which the competent minister would then act upon, as was previously the case.
- Pursuant to the new Act, **ASHE may conduct cross-border evaluations**, while in the case of joint studies the *European QA approach to joint programmes* is applied in its entirety. ASHE has received a few queries regarding the accreditation of joint study programmes in accordance with the *European approach*, and arrangements regarding these are ongoing. ASHE has also been informed that other EQAR member agencies will be accrediting some joint programmes and will, in case of positive decisions, recognize the accreditation decisions of these agencies from abroad.

Changes to the legislative framework have presented ASHE with the challenging task of aligning external evaluation procedures with the new Act. Given that the Act was adopted as ASHE was completing the second cycle of external evaluations, in addition to carrying out alignments with the Act, this was also an opportunity to implement a whole range of improvements in accordance with stakeholder feedback and experiences from the second cycle of external evaluations, as well as the recommendations made by the ENQA panel in the external review of ASHE. In the course of 2023, **improved documents (ordinances,**

instructions, standards and forms) were developed for the purpose of conducting the initial accreditation of study programmes, initial accreditation of higher education institutions and re-accreditation of higher education institutions, to be used in the third cycle of external evaluations (which has commenced in early 2024). Below is an overview of the improvements which have been carried out, grouped by ESG and in accordance with the received recommendations and suggestions (more detailed information is available in the table which is an annex to this document):

ESG 3.1

- There is greater stakeholder diversity in the Accreditation Council (two representatives of the Conference of Polytechnics, two student representatives) and pursuant to the new Act, a Complaints Committee and a Follow-up Committee have been established which both include a student representative.
- It is now possible to conduct cross-border evaluations, which includes the evaluation of joint studies in accordance with the *European QA approach to joint programmes*.
- A new website has been developed which is soon to go live, and it specifies clearly the activities ASHE carries out in accordance with the ESG.

ESG 3.3

- ASHE decides on the outcome of the accreditation procedures, which has led to greater autonomy of the Agency.

ESG 3.4

- A new website has been developed which is soon to go live, and it distinguishes clearly between thematic analyses and other publication types, as well as provides a clear structure for the presentation of all publication types.

ESG 3.6

- External evaluations in higher education in accordance with the ESG now envisage the collecting of stakeholder feedback by means of focus groups and interviews (as opposed to only surveys as before).
- In order to improve the effectiveness of external evaluation procedures, it is planned to carry out an analysis of their impact at the institution and programme level.

ESG 2.1

- All standards which are used in accreditation procedures have been revised and improved (with stakeholder involvement), in accordance with the ESG and the new legislative framework, stakeholder feedback and experiences from the second cycle of external evaluations.
- When developing the standards used in the initial accreditation of study programmes, care was taken to include a check of the compliance of the study programme with occupational and qualification standards, if these have been added to the Croatian Qualifications Framework Register.

- For external evaluations abroad, ASHE will use the standards developed for evaluations in the Republic of Croatia as a starting point. ASHE always takes into account the specifics of the legislative framework within which the foreign higher education institution operates. The specifics of the national context within which the foreign higher education institution operates are analysed, and when the differences have been determined, individual criteria are adapted and amended to ensure that ASHE external evaluations carried out abroad are effective and fit-for-purpose.
- The website clearly presents the initial accreditation of study programmes and initial accreditation of higher education institutions as two distinct procedures.

ESG 2.2

- When developing and updating the criteria and methodology for conducting external evaluations, the Agency ensures that stakeholders are involved from the country where the higher education institution operates, taking care that the specifics of the legislative framework in that particular country are complied with.

ESG 2.3

- ASHE conducts external evaluation procedures in a professional, consistent and transparent manner, both in Croatia and abroad, and ensures that the procedures include all the necessary stages: the self-evaluation, the site-visit, the report/decision and follow-up.

ESG 2.5

- The changes to the documents used in accreditation procedures now stipulate that the comments of the higher education institution on the report of the panel are sent to the expert panel, which considers each individual comment of the HEI and agrees on any modifications to the report. The final report is sent to the higher education institution.
- Pursuant to the new Act, the outcome of re-accreditations may no longer be a letter of expectation with a ban on enrolment.

ESG 2.6

- A new website has been developed which is soon to go live, and it is planned to have a searchable database of outcomes of external evaluation procedures according to additional criteria.

ESG 2.7.

- A Complaints Committee has been established which will resolve any complaints filed regarding the proposals (opinions) of the Accreditation Council (the appeals procedure as described in ESG 2.7). There is no possibility of appeal against the decision of the Agency but the higher education institution may initiate an administrative dispute. The higher education institution may also file a complaint regarding the conduct of the external evaluation procedure (the complaints procedure as described by ESG 2.7).

Information about the option of filing a complaint or an appeal has been made publicly available and HEIs have been made aware of this.

Key challenges in the forthcoming period:

- Conducting external evaluation procedures in accordance with the new legislative framework and improved documents in the third cycle of external evaluations;
- Increased workload in terms of the volume of external evaluations given that all new study programmes are subject to the initial accreditation procedure, and consequently the need to ensure additional human resources;
- Cooperation with and operation of new bodies: Accreditation Council, Complaints Committee and Follow-up Committee, as well as resolution of complaints/appeals and follow-ups pursuant to revised documents;
- Further use of the Croatian Qualifications Framework in accreditation procedures;
- Conducting cross-border evaluations;
- Digitalization of ASHE business processes, development of a national system of records in higher education and science (as part of the e-Universities project on which ASHE is a partner institution).
- Support to higher education institutions as they continue to strengthen their internal QA systems.