

**Changes in higher education as
a result of implementation of quality
assurance systems
2019 – 2021**

Thematic report

Bratislava, 30 December 2021

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PREFACE

The thematic report of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education focuses on fundamental changes in higher education related to the introduction of quality assurance systems of higher education in the Slovak Republic between 2019 and 2021.

The implementation of quality assurance systems in higher education institutions has been a European trend over the last two decades. It is a specific version of quality management, which has been known and used in industry for several decades. With the adoption of a special law in 2018 and subsequent steps, the Slovak Republic joins a broad European family of countries aligned with *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, which are part of Bologna's process of harmonization of higher education in Europe.

The adoption of a special law by the National Council of the Slovak Republic highlights the importance of the need to improve the quality of higher education in Slovakia. This is not an one-off improvement in quality, but the introduction of mechanisms for its continuous evaluation and improvement, systematically and directly within higher education institutions. This quality reform represents one of the deepest reforms of higher education in Slovakia precisely because it is inherently directed to the depths of institutions and to the core of the processes that make up higher education itself, and it affects the attitudes of all actors who have an impact on higher education. Thus, not only teachers or academic officials, but also students, graduates, employers and the general public.

The law provided for a relatively long transitional period to reconcile the life and mission of higher education institutions with the law and standards, thus respecting natural educational cycles. The first full assessment of the implementation and functioning of the internal higher education systems is expected to be completed by the end of 2023. However, in the three years since the law approval, a lot of work has already been done, the results of which are starting to work in higher education institutions. Therefore, in this thematic report we bring an overview of events with links to the legislative frameworks of the Slovak Republic to European standards, through information on the building of the Accreditation Agency, external quality assurance procedures, the design of accreditation standards, as well as an overview of the first changes in the internal legislation of the higher education institutions and in their offer of study programmes.

Robert Redhammer

Chairman of the Executive Board of the Agency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, the Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as the „Act on Quality Assurance“) was adopted.¹ The legal standard created a legislative and institutional framework for the implementation of quality assurance systems of higher education in Slovakia by modern European methods. The thematic report outlines the implementation of quality management systems in higher education in the Slovak Republic, following the mentioned act.

In recent decades, higher education institutions have achieved the political objective of increasing the proportion of university graduates in the population. With the adoption of the Act on Quality Assurance, the attention of state policies in the field of higher education has been shifted to systematic quality assurance of education. The chosen instruments are based on the best practice in Europe; in the last two or three years their implementation began also in Slovak conditions.

It is necessary to continue with the implementation of quality systems and to support these processes with both legislative and financially appropriate targeted incentives. We recommend that higher education institutions implement their own internal quality assurance system as soon as possible in accordance with the applicable law and published standards and verify its implementation in the study programmes provided by higher education institutions. The law requires higher education institutions to harmonize their internal regulations and study programmes by 1 September 2022 at the latest and to request a review of the compliance with the standards by the end of 2022.

Change in legislation – new legal and institutional framework

The adopted Act on Quality Assurance is based on *The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) developed by the European higher education authorities² and endorsed by ministers of European countries responsible for higher education in the framework of the *Bologna Process* for Harmonization of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The essence of the changes is the transfer of responsibility for the quality of the provided education to the provider itself, i.e. to higher education institutions. The changes are implemented through internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions. „Quality assurance“ means the use of all known tools to ensure the quality of the provided education from all possible aspects. The efficiency of internal systems is increased by their external review at expert level; a review shall be provided by accreditation agencies.

¹ Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on quality assurance of higher education and on amendments to act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and on amendment to certain acts, as amended.

² The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Student Union (ESU), the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), in cooperation with Education International (EI), BUSINESSEUROPE and the European Higher Education Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

In doing so, the diversity of students’ needs, their employability, the diversity of the mission of institutions, social and economic needs of society, etc. must be respected.

The Act on Quality Assurance established the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as „SAAHE“ or „Agency“) as an independent public institution implementing the external part of quality assurance. The Agency has set of effective legal powers in the field of accreditation processes and quality assurance of higher education institutions.

The timetable for the implementation of quality assurance in higher education depends on the deadlines set by law, in particular the creation of agency bodies by the Ministry of Education, the entry into force of accreditation standards and the deadline by which higher education institutions must apply for a review of compliance with standards and with law (2022).

| Indication of activity | 2020 | | | | 2021 | | | | 2022 | | | | 2023 | | | | 2024 | | | | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 2030+ | | |
|---|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|---|-------|--|--|
| | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Approval of accreditation standards | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Aligning the internal systems of HEIs with standards | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Aligning of study programmes with standards | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| 6. Notice of alignment | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Application for assessment of the internal system of HEI | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Reviewing the compliance of the university’s internal system | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Reviewing the compliance of the implementation of new study programmes | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Submission of applications for new accreditations of habilitation and inaugural proc. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 11. Monitoring compliance with the standards for the internal system | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. Construction and optimization of administrative and IT support | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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Table 1. Framework timetable for the implementation of internal and external quality assurance in higher education in the Slovak Republic

Development and publication of accreditation standards and methodology

The Agency, in cooperation with experts and stakeholders, has developed and published accreditation standards in accordance with *European standards and ESG guidelines*. Following the ministry’s statement, the accreditation standards were approved by the Agency’s Executive Board and published in mid-2020 with effect from 1 September 2020.

According to the Act on Quality Assurance, the Agency is responsible for the preparation and approval of accreditation standards, which consists of Standards for the Internal System³, Standards for Study Programmes⁴ and Standards for Habilitation and Inauguration Proceedings⁵. In accordance with the Act, *standards* are a set of requirements, the fulfilment of which is conditional on the granting of relevant accreditation. When developing the draft standards, the agency has cooperated with leading and recognized experts mainly from higher education backgrounds and practices in Slovakia and abroad. The draft standards were commented on by all stakeholders, in particular university representatives,

³ [Standards for the Internal System](#)

⁴ [Standards for Study Programmes](#)

⁵ [Standards for Habilitation and Inauguration Proceedings](#)

professional experts and students: The Higher Education Council, Rectors' Conference, Student Council for Higher Education, Federation of employers' associations of the Slovak Republic, Alliance of Sector Councils and Section of Higher Education Institutions of the Ministry of Education. In the process of multilateral consultations, the Agency received 1 235 comments. Of these, 231 (18.7%) were fully accepted, 763 (61.8%) partially accepted and 143 (11.6%) were not accepted; 98 (7.9%) comments were not relevant comments and were not evaluated.

The standards have been designed to:

- guarantee the autonomy and responsibility of higher education institutions for ensuring and demonstrating the quality of higher education,
- encourage higher education institutions to improve the quality,
- enable higher education institutions to demonstrate the quality of education and compliance with the standards,
- allow for the diversity of higher education institutions, study programmes and students,
- promote the involvement of all stakeholders in quality assurance processes
- provide unambiguous information and evidence for the Agency's decision-making,
- lead to an appropriate burden and costs for higher education institutions,
- ensure transparent, impartial, independent, methodically consistent and professional action by the Agency's bodies and staff and members of the review panels.

The Agency organized a range of events in order to present, help to optimally understand and facilitate the implementation of accreditation standards at higher education institutions. The first event was a conference on the introduction of standards; records and information from individual presentations are available on the Agency's website. Higher education institutions have the possibility to send questions to which the Agency provides them with answers and guidance. Frequent complaints are published on the Agency's website in the FAQ section. By November 2021, 14 thematic consultations had taken place through online seminars, in which 300 or more participants regularly participate.

In accordance with the requirements of the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency has also developed a *Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards* (hereinafter referred to as the „Methodology“). *Methodology* means a set of procedures, criteria and indicators through which the review panels of the Agency's Executive Board and the staff of the Agency evaluate the fulfilment of standards and measures to ensure compliance of the internal system or its implementation with the standards for the internal system. The preparation of the methodology was accompanied by extensive consultations with stakeholders and subsequent comments from the public. After the comments were processed, the methodology for evaluating standards⁶ was approved at the Agency's Executive Board meeting on 17 September 2020.

Changes to internal legislation at higher education institutions

In 2021, higher education institutions began to harmonize their internal regulations with the standards for the internal system and to harmonize study programmes with the requirements of the standards for study programmes. This process is due to be completed by 1 September 2022.

At the end of November 2021, a total of 17 higher education institutions adopted and

⁶ [Methodology for Evaluating Standards SAAHE](https://www.saavs.sk) (saavs.sk)

published their internal quality assurance regulations, referring to the current legislative framework. Of this set, there are fifteen public higher education institutions, one state and one private higher education institution. In several cases, the statute of the higher education institution has also been amended to support the new legislation.

The formal adoption of an internal regulation defining the internal system of quality assurance in higher education is a necessary but not sufficient act. Standards for the internal system require not only the introduction of formalized procedures, but also their implementation, i.e. compliance, continuous monitoring and periodic evaluation of their implementation.

Preparation of external quality assurance - accreditations

In addition to developing standards and the methodology for their evaluation, preparation for accreditations required institutional provision of the Agency, establishment of a list of reviewers, profiling of information system tools, detailed instructions and explanatory information events.

According to ESG 2.3 of European standards and guidelines, external quality assurance, i.e. accreditations, aims to increase the efficiency of internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions. The monitoring and achievement of the objective is carried out by external review at the level of expertise by the Agency.

In order to comply all ESG requirements for accreditation procedures, the Agency has collaborated ENQA association. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, the Agency prepared a *National Action Plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic*⁷. The Action Plan is the outcome of the international project, *Supporting European QA agencies and national authorities in meeting the ESG 2015 (SEQA-ESG)*⁸ with the support of the European Union's Erasmus+ programme. The action plan was also discussed with representatives of higher education institutions, employers' representatives and approved by ENQA.

External review (accreditations) activities take place in four stages:

1. examination of the application, the application documents and the available information
2. on-site review – university visit,
3. processing of the evaluation report by the review panel (in the case of accreditation procedure or review of the internal system, the opinion of the higher education institution is also included) and
4. the opinion or decision of the Executive Board of the Agency.

The review processes of study programmes, internal quality assurance systems and habilitation proceedings and inaugural proceedings are based on the Methodology for evaluation of standards and are further elaborated in the administration manuals of accreditation procedures of SAAHE.

List of reviewers and review panels of the Executive Board of the Agency

In order to assess a specific application from a higher education institution, to verify

⁷ [National Action Plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic](#)

⁸ [SEQA - ESG](#)

the measures taken by a higher education institution and to assess proposals for the modification of study programmes, the Executive Board of the Agency shall set up a review panel of persons from the Agency's list of reviewers.

Therefore, the Agency has developed rules for inclusion in the list of reviewers and proceeded to select reviewers. As of 1 December 2021, 1 442 reviewers are registered in the list of reviewers, of which 1 139 are fully trained, 233 are foreign trained reviewers (of which 126 are from the Czech Republic), 104 students, and 214 professional experts (of which 180 are in combination with academic experience). In 2021, the Agency modified the way reviewers are obtained by targetting professionals in fields with insufficient representation of experts.

When setting up review panels, we take into account of the type of procedure, the specificity of the field of study and the profile of the reviewer. In 2020 and 2021, a total of 383 reviewers were involved in the review panels of the Agency's Executive Board.

Fully digitized agency

From the outset, the Agency has been built as a fully digitized institution. This is also supported by the legislative framework, which requires the submission of applications for accreditation by higher education institutions by electronic means. For its own specific accreditation procedures, including communication with reviewers and higher education institutions, its own information system was gradually built in individual modules based on the current needs. Commercially available information systems are deployed for the agency's individual administrative activities as a legal entity. The Agency also uses general legislation on digitization of public administration for electronic communication with higher education institutions.

Guidance on how to apply for external quality assurance activities, including forms, is published on the Agency's website: <https://saavs.sk/sk/ziadosti/>.

Performance of the Agency's activities – accreditations carried out

The Agency started its activities by taking over the agenda of the previous Accreditation Commission, an advisory body of the government of the Slovak Republic, which ceased its activities on 31 December 2019 in accordance with the law. The agenda taken over included, in particular, an information system, digital records from the Accreditation Commission and two unfinished procedures. These were completed by the Agency according to the criteria applicable to the submission of applications of higher education institutions in accordance with the procedures under the Act on Quality Assurance.

In 2020 and 2021, the Agency verified the results of the measures taken by higher education institutions according to the transitional provision of § 35 para. 6 of the Quality Assurance Act. The higher education institution was obliged to report to the Ministry of Education on the measures taken to eliminate deficiencies (hereinafter referred to as the „report“) according to the regulations in force until 31 October 2018 due to non-compliance with any of the accreditation criteria, if such an obligation was stated by the Accreditation Commission in its statement in previous accreditations. The Ministry of Education forwarded to the Agency to process 299 such reports. The result of the university's measures taken to eliminate the deficiencies was verified by the Agency, according to

criteria following the regulations in force until 31 October 2018.

In that period, the Agency reviewed 264 reports concerning the elimination of deficiencies in ongoing study programmes. After verifying the result of the adopted measures of higher education institutions, the Agency found in 242 cases that the university met the relevant criteria for accreditation and marked the cancellation of the time limit in the register of study programmes, if the obligation of the university arose due to time restrictions. The Agency renewed the granted right if the university's obligation arose due to the suspension of the granted right. For 22 study programmes, the Agency stated that the higher education institution did not meet the relevant accreditation criteria even after the measures were taken, on the basis of which it suspended the implementation of these study programmes.

The Agency reviewed 35 reports concerning the elimination of deficiencies in relation to implementation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings. After verifying the result of the adopted measures of higher education institutions, the Agency found in 28 cases that the university, after the adoption of measures, met the relevant accreditation criteria and subsequently marked the cancellation of the time limit in the register of study fields. In 6 cases, the Agency stated that the higher education institution did not meet the relevant accreditation criteria after the measures were taken and revoked the granted right from the higher education institution.

In 2021, the Agency also launched the first proceedings on the basis of university applications for accreditation of new study programmes in accordance with the applicable accreditation standards. The Act on Quality Assurance allowed higher education institutions to submit applications to the Agency for the accreditation of new study programmes in accordance with §30 of the Act by the end of March 2021, even if they already operate in the field and level of higher education. Out of the total number of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic (33), 16 higher education institutions used this option and submitted 177 applications. Two higher education institutions submitted an application for accreditation of new combination study programmes. In total, the applications concerned 24 fields of study. Most applications were submitted in the field of *economics and management* (26 applications), *teaching and pedagogical sciences* (25 applications), *arts* (19 applications), *Earth sciences* (13 applications), and *general medicine* (12 applications).

Applications for accreditation of new study programmes were submitted by higher education institutions at all three levels of higher education. The most (81) applications were submitted at doctoral level of higher education, 50 applications were submitted at bachelor's level, 46 applications were submitted at master's level and two applications were submitted in the combined first and second level of higher education.

A total of 21 draft modifications of study programmes were submitted to the Agency in accordance with § 35 (7) of the Quality Assurance Act. By 15 December 2021, the Agency had granted 16 approvals to the draft modifications submitted. In 4 cases, the Agency stated that the submitted proposal for modification of the study programme of the university does not create a precondition for meeting the standards for the study programme, and decided to ask the university to submit a new proposal for the modification of the study programme within 180 days.

The Agency initiated 8 proceedings of its own initiative according to §35 (14) of the Quality Assurance Act. In one of the proceedings, the Agency identified deficiencies and initiated proceedings to withdraw the accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings in the

relevant field of habilitation and inaugural proceedings of the higher education institution.

In 2021, higher education institutions submitted 145 applications to the Agency for the granting of prior consent to modify the study programme in accordance with §30 (9) of the Quality Assurance Act. With the prior consent of the Agency, higher education institutions may make adjustments to the relevant study programme.

Changes in the development of the number of registered study programmes

All accredited study programmes are registered in the registers of the Ministry of Education. As of the effective date of the standards, a decrease in the number of registered study programmes from 7,359 to 6,428 has been recorded as of 9 December 2021. This represents 931 cancelled study programmes, of which 630 are suspended and 301 are not suspended study programmes, i.e. it is a decrease of 40.1 %, or more precisely, a decrease of 5.2% in relative terms. This suggests that higher education institutions have not only started to modify and align study programmes with standards, but also cancel non-perspective or non-provided study programmes.

With the adoption of the Quality Assurance Act and the related amendment to the Higher Education Act in 2018, the registers managed by the Ministry of Education, in particular the Register of Study Programmes and the Register of Study Fields, became legally relevant public information sources for universities' rights, somewhat similar to the real estate cadastre.

In terms of comparing individual levels of higher education, the overall development of the number of study programmes at all levels of higher education is similar. However, it is more pronounced in the first and second level, and less in the third level of study. The decrease in recent years has mainly concerned the part-time form of study. Compared to public universities, private universities recorded a more dynamic percentage increase in the number of study programmes in the period up to 1 September 2020 and a more moderate percentage decrease in study programmes in the period after this date.

Student Satisfaction Survey

One of the main pillars of quality assurance is feedback from stakeholders and its use for the benefit of improving the quality of education. Given the importance of students' views as stakeholders in the quality of education, the Agency decided to carry out a systematic survey of students' satisfaction with their higher education. The survey was conducted under the name *Academic Quarter*.

The target group of the survey were the first and second level university students and combined first and second level university students. Students were approached primarily through school e-mail addresses, which they have entered in the central student register.

The research team managed to reach 99% of the total of 126,798 students. A total of 20 056 questionnaire replies (16% of the student population) were collected during the survey; of these, 19 983 were valid questionnaires. The data collection took place in May 2021.

The survey is representative at the level of the type of higher education institution (public, state, private), forms of study (full-time and part-time), level (first, second, combined first and second level of study), sex of respondents, faculty and field of study. A significant proportion of foreign students (1419) and students with specific needs (1024) were

represented in the sample; this makes it possible to examine the needs of these groups of students as well.

The results of the survey were provided to universities in anonymized processing and, with some generalization, to the public in an interactive graphical *dashboard* tool. In assessing the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions, the Agency will examine how higher education institutions have handled the information obtained, i.e. at what level of efficiency is their internal system.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the National Council of the Slovak Republic adopted the Quality Assurance Act⁹, which created a legislative and institutional framework for the implementation of higher education quality assurance systems by modern European methods. The Act is based on *The standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) developed by European higher education authorities and endorsed by the ministers of European countries responsible for higher education in the framework of the Bologna Process for Harmonization of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In terms of the long-term development of Slovak higher education, the reform of quality assurance respects and builds on previous reforms. This is, in particular, the first major post-November change enshrined in the law in 1990, aimed at abolishing the Communist Party's leading role, introducing academic freedoms to research, reporting research results, autonomously managing higher education institutions and electing their representatives. It is also linked to a significant increase in the share of educated people in the population year stimulated by the policy of the government of the Slovak Republic, in particular through the establishment of new higher education institutions since the end of the 1990s and the introduction of a „capitalization“ financing model of public higher education institutions in the Millennium Programme, as well as the subsequent enactment of selected elements of the *Bologna Declaration* and the granting of economic autonomy to higher education institutions in the act on higher education being in force since 2002. Thus, if higher education institutions have mastered the state's demand for greater student quantity, logically the attention turns to the quality of the education provided.

The new legislative framework has launched a number of processes, from building the institutional background of a new independent accreditation agency through the creation of accreditation standards compliant with ESG, the methodology of their evaluation and continues with processes that enter into almost all aspects of the quality of education at all levels and workplaces of universities in the Slovak Republic, as well as into the procedures of the accreditations of higher education institutions.

The essence of the changes is the transfer of responsibility for the quality of the provided education to the provider itself, i.e. to the universities. This is the primary and essential role of the provider. The changes are implemented through internal quality assurance systems for higher education; efficiency is increased by external review at expert level. In doing so, the diversity of students' needs, their employability, the diversity of the institutions' mission, etc. must be respected.

The very concept of „quality assurance“ must be understood as using all known and available tools and mechanisms to ensure that the provided education is at the required level in terms of quality, from all possible aspects. As higher education is a rather complex, multifaceted and long-lasting process, quality assurance also faces manibility and complexity, and the implementation of these processes and the effect of these processes will take time.

The thematic report aims to provide information on the early years of the implementation of quality assurance systems, complemented by a basic framework for

⁹ Act. No. 269/2018 Coll. on quality assurance of higher education and on amendments to act No. 343/2015 Coll. on public procurement and on amendments to certain acts as amended.

legislative setting of the international context to which the Slovak Republic has subscribed. We believe that this information will contribute to a better understanding of the complex processes experienced by higher education institutions in Slovakia at all levels in these years. The document in no way has the ambition to provide a complete picture of the state of higher education in the Slovak Republic.

The submitted document shall also analyse evaluations of reports on the elimination of university deficiencies; the Quality Assurance Act requires the Agency to evaluate reports following deficiencies identified in previous accreditations. We do so in an effort to keep the public informed about changes in higher education. Such an approach shall also be fully in line with the ESG's request for the Agency to carry out thematic analyses.

This thematic report is prepared in accordance with the provisions of *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). According to them, the Agencies shall regularly publish reports identifying, describing and analysing the general findings resulting from their external quality assurance activities. They also proceed in accordance with § 4 para.2 (g) point 2 of the Act No. 269/2018 on Quality Assurance (hereinafter referred to as the „Quality Assurance Act“), according to which the Agency produces analyses of the development of the higher education system in the Slovak Republic, including an analysis of internal evaluation reports concerning internal systems.

2. LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENT OF THE SYSTEM OF ACCREDITATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION – FIRST STEP TOWARDS IMPROVING QUALITY

2.1. Legislative framework for accreditations of higher education institutions until 30 October 2018

In the period prior to the adoption of the Act on Quality Assurance in 2018, the tasks related to accreditation of study programmes were regulated in the Act on Higher Education itself. The Accreditation Commission with 24 permanent review panels was established as an advisory body of the government of the Slovak Republic. It performed two main tasks. The first task was to assess applications for accreditation the study programme, or applications for the granting of rights in habilitation proceedings and inaugural proceedings. The examination of applications preceded the minister's decision on the right of the universities to carry out their work. The second task was *comprehensive accreditation*. It corresponded to a periodic evaluation of the level of scientific research and artistic activity of the institutions, supplemented by a re-accreditation of all rights granted. The decisions granting accreditation, i.e. the right of higher education institutions to carry out their main activities through specific study programmes or to carry out habilitation and inaugural proceedings, were granted by the minister as a member of the government.

The Accreditation Commission was a full member of ENQA from 2002 to 2012. Based on the results of the ENQA external evaluation, its status changed to associate member after September 2013. The circumstances of the non-acceptance of the Accreditation Commission as a full member of ENQA included the following reasons: the unresolved issue of the Commission's independence from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, the lack of its autonomy, the lack of financial and human resources to support the activities of the Accreditation Commission and the lack of transparent mechanisms to avoid conflicts of interest. The ENQA Council recommended to the Accreditation Commission that there should be no re-membership of ENQA unless there are substantial changes in the way it works as well as in the executive structure of the Commission, or unless there is a significant shift on the basis of which the Accreditation Commission is confident that it fully meets the criteria for ENQA membership.

The most serious reason for not accepting the Accreditation Commission into ENQA was the fact that the rights of independent higher education institutions were decided by a member of the government. Another reason was that the assessment in the Accreditation Commission was carried out in permanent review panels. More recent trends in European rules avoid permanent review panels in an effort to avoid possible systematic bias or conflicts of interest. However, the permanent review panels also had a significant advantage: continuous knowledge of the subject matter of the assessment allowed them to interpret the condition, propose solutions and formulate conclusions with support for casual context. The Accreditation Commission paid close attention to the issue of possible bias taking into account the competencies of the members of permanent review panels, its implementing regulations and the attention of higher education institutions and the public.

Overall, the system was designed in such a way that a significant part of the responsibility for eligibility to carry out a specific study programme at a particular higher education school was transferred to the central authorities in the state. Higher education

institutions thus lost motivation to continuously improve the quality of the provided education; several relied on the formal approval or formal fulfilment of certain indicators. Even so, the Accreditation Commission, in particular by the criteria set, managed to establish and implement a number of evaluation standards. Some experience was also used in the development of quality standards in the successor Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as the Ministry) proceeded to the draft special legislation on accreditations in the form of a separate act on quality assurance. After difficult negotiations with university representations and stakeholders, the law was finally adopted in the National Council of the Slovak Republic in 2018. This started a real process of approaching European values and quality assurance practices in higher education in Slovakia.

2.2. New legislative framework for accreditations of higher education institutions from 1 November 2018

The new legislative framework for accreditations of higher education institutions was introduced by Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on quality assurance of higher education and on amendments to Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on public procurement and on amendments to certain acts as amended (Act on Quality Assurance). This Act supplements the basic legislation governing the activities of higher education institutions, presented in particular by Act No.131/2002 Coll. on higher education institutions and on amendments to certain acts (Act on Higher Education) and subsequent legal norms, in particular corresponding decrees of the ministry.

According to the Ministry's explanatory statement, the main objective of the Act on Quality Assurance is to create legislative preconditions for better quality assurance of higher education institutions and the establishment of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as the „Agency“).

The Act builds on the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015)* issued by European organizations bringing together stakeholders in higher education – the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Student Union (ESU), the European Association of Universities (EUA), the European Association for Higher Education Institutions (EURASHE) in cooperation with Education International (EI), BUSINESSEUROPE and the European Higher Education Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). ESG 2015 standards were adopted in May 2015 by ministers responsible for higher education in European countries.

As stated in the ministry's explanatory statement, the Slovak Republic is part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and is interested in the quality of education among countries whose higher education is at a high level and university graduates in the Slovak Republic are internationally accepted.

The starting point of the ESG 2015 standards and also the Quality Assurance Act is the requirement that the quality of provided higher education is primarily the responsibility of the higher education institution.

The higher education institution ensures quality through its internal system of quality assurance of higher education (hereinafter referred to as the „internal system“), its

implementation and continuous development. The internal system should take into account the mission of the higher education institution. The higher education institution shall adapt the requirements of its internal system by internal regulation. In particular, it lays down the rules for the creation, approval, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and modification of study programmes, the procedure for verifying the application of the latest knowledge in the content of study programmes, the involvement of student representatives and other stakeholders in creating and modifying study programmes, the linking of the study programme to the appropriate level of the national qualification framework, the rules for assessing students, the rules for carrying out the creative activities of the higher education institution, rules for examining students' suggestions and procedures for verifying sufficient spatial, material, technical, information and personnel provision of study programmes.

The higher education institution is obliged to ask the Agency to review its internal system and its implementation in the specified cycle, for the first time by the end of 2022 at the latest. The compliance of the internal system with standards, its functionality and correct implementation basically means the institutional accreditation of the higher education institution in the study field and level, and the higher education institution thus be authorized to independently create and modify study programmes in the respective study fields and levels.

In addition to the review of the internal system, the act regulates the accreditation of study programmes, which allows the extension of the higher education institution's authority to conduct higher education studies in new study fields and levels. At the same time, the accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings was maintained in modified form.

The Agency established by the Quality Assurance Act as an independent public institution, which has separate decision-making powers in the field of the accreditation process, has legal requirements to become a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and to be included in the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EQAR).

2.3. Building an agency and its external quality assurance system

The Agency was established by the Quality Assurance Act as an independent public institution carrying out external quality assurance in higher education. The Agency's top decision-making body is the Executive Board, which has nine members. Every representation of higher education institutions, i.e. the Council of Higher Education of the Slovak Republic, the Slovak Rectors' Conference and the Slovak Council of Higher Education Institutions, nominate two members of the Executive Board. Two members of the Executive Board are nominated by employers' representatives. The ninth member is the Chairman of the Executive Board. By law, members of the Executive Board act independently and are not bound by the orders of the organizations that nominated them for office. The term of office of a member of the Executive Board is six years.

The Chairman of the Executive Board is appointed by the Minister of Education on the basis of the results of the selection procedure, while the selection committee for the post of Chairman of the Executive Board has five members appointed by the Minister of Education. One member is nominated by the Council of Higher Education Institutions of the Slovak Republic, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council of Higher Education

Institutions and a representative association of employers; the fifth member of the Commission is appointed by the minister without a proposal.

The Quality Assurance Act sets out the agency's competencies in detail. In particular, the power to decide on the:

- Compliance of the internal system and its implementation with the standards for the internal system,
- Granting or not granting accreditation of a study programme
- Granting, not granting or withdrawing the accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings,
- Imposition of a corrective measure,
- Applications for state approval to act as a private higher education institution.

It was necessary to rely on a broader system of internal rules and legislation for the agency's activities had to be used for the Agency's activities, its powers as well as the consistent exercise of its powers. This legislation was gradually being produced in the Agency until today. It consists of 32 directives, regulations and other types of norms governing internal and external procedures. The most important are the Statute, the Institution order, the rules of procedure, the fee schedule and more. Internal regulations form (in addition to the Quality assurance act) an important pillar of the Agency's consequent and defensible decision-making. They were received in the prescribed manner; the vast majority is subject to approval by the Executive Board. Equally important is the continuous updating of internal legislation, forced by external changes in the laws by which the Agency is bound, but also by feedback from application practice and optimization of internal processes.

The statutory competence of the Agency and the full provision of its activities is linked to staffing by qualified employees. In this respect, the Agency has started to be build from the very foundations as a newly established independent public institution. The number of employees (excluding members of the Executive Board) gradually increased according to needs and the increase of the agenda. The focal was the year of 2020, in which a total of 9 new jobs had to be created. The priority was given to strengthening the department of accreditation activities by 5 employees. Last but not least, jobs have been supplemented by one lawyer and one economist. At the time of this report, in addition to the members of the Executive Board, the Agency has 21 staff members, three of them part-time. In justified cases, the institute of the out-of-work agreement shall also be used. The breakdown of the agenda between staff and the delegation of responsibilities required a more fragmented organizational structure of the Agency and the creation of three departments. This change was reflected in the new institution order adopted in August 2021.

The financing of the Agency's operations and activities is provided from a number of sources; however, the focus rests on the contribution from the state budget. For the sake of greater independence, the law allows the Agency to obtain revenue from fees for certain acts of the Agency, as well as revenue from other sources, such as grants for the implementation of project activities.

It is clear from the above that the Agency has created the preconditions for a firm place in the higher education system in Slovakia. Legislative preconditions for independent decision-making in individual cases, and thus preconditions for full membership in European structures have been created by the way it is established, the way the bodies are filled, the scope, management and also multi-source financing.

2.4. Implementation of quality assurance systems – transitional period

Following the tasks specified in the Act on Quality Assurance, the Agency prepared a timetable for the implementation of quality assurance in higher education. The basic framework of the various stages of implementation of internal and external quality assurance systems depended mainly on the date of adoption of the act, the creation of agency bodies by the Ministry of Education, the entry into force of accreditation standards and the deadline by which higher education institutions must apply for a review of compliance with standards and the law. This deadline was shortened by the amendment of the Act on Quality Assurance at the end of 2022 from the original end of the year 2024. This has increased the pressure for earlier verification of compliance of the internal systems of higher education institutions with standards.

| Indication of activity | 2020 | | | | 2021 | | | | 2022 | | | | 2023 | | | | 2024 | | | | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 2030+ |
|--|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|---|---|---|---|---|-------|
| | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | | | | | | |
| 1. Approval of accreditation standards | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Aligning the internal systems of HEIs with standards | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Aligning of study programmes with standards | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Accreditations of new study programmes | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Cancellation of non – prospective study programmes by HEIs | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Notice of alignment | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Application for a review of the internal system of HEI | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Reviewing the compliance of the university’s internal system | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Reviewing the compliance of the implementation of new study programmes | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Submission of applications for new accreditations for habilitation and inaugural proc. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 11. Monitoring compliance with the standards for the internal system | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. Construction and optimization of administrative and IT support | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 13. Consultations and training of agency staff and HEIs | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 14. Implementation and optimization of the agency’s internal quality assurance system | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| green - at the request of the HEI | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ochre – agency verification | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| yellow – monitoring and surveillance | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| blue - acts of the agency towards the HEI | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 1. Framework timetable for the implementation of internal and external quality assurance in higher education in the Slovak Republic

Accreditation standards have been developed, commented on by the public and finalised in the course of 2019; subsequently submitted to the Ministry of Education in early 2020. Following the minister’s comments, they were approved by the Agency’s Executive Board and published in mid-2020 with effect from 1 September 2020. From this date, higher education institutions are obliged to harmonize their internal regulations and study programmes within two years, i.e. until 1 September 2022.

| Indication of proceeding/procedure | 2020 | | | | 2021 | | | | 2022 | | | | 2023 | | | | 2024 | | | | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 2030+ | |
|--|------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|--|
| | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | | | | | | | |
| 1. Verification of the result of the measures taken by HEIs in eliminating deficiencies from previous accreditations pursuant to § 35 para. 6 | Rich | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Rich | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Rich | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Draft modification of the study programme pursuant to § 35 para. 7 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Prior consent to the modification of new study programmes pursuant to § 30 para. 9 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Application for accreditation of a new study programme pursuant to § 30 | | | | | Green | Green | Green | Green | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Proceedings on the Agency's own initiative pursuant to § 35 para. 14 | | | | | Rich | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | Pastel | | | | | | | |
| 6. Proceedings for the withdrawal of the rights of habilitation and inaugural proceedings pursuant to § 32 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Application for a review of the compliance of the internal system with standards pursuant to § 24 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Monitoring of compliance of the implementation of the (new) study programme with the submitted application for accreditation of the study programme and the standards for the study programme pursuant to § 30 para. 10 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Review of the compliance of the implementation of a (new) study programme with the standards for the study programme pursuant to § 30 para. 11 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Application for accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings pursuant to § 31 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 11. Application for a state consent pursuant to § 33 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. Monitoring of compliance with internal system standards pursuant to § 24 para. 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 13. Extraordinary proceeding pursuant to § 24 para. 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| implementation | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Rich color – concentration of proceedings | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Pastel color – ongoing proceedings | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| green – at the request of the HEI | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ochre – verification of the Agency | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| yellow – monitoring and surveillance | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| blue – action of the Agency towards the HEI | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 2. Indicative timetable for the implementation of the Agency's procedures for proceedings under Act No. 269/2018 Coll.

The Act on Quality Assurance also regulates the interrelations between the Agency and higher education institutions or the Agency and applicants for state approval. The special legislation clarifies and to some extent replaces the provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act. The Act regulates a total of thirteen different types of proceedings, including those provided for in the transitional provisions. In terms of the first implementations of each species, these are arranged in a time series in the indicative schedule set out in the Table 2.

At the time of the processing of this report, the Agency shall carry out proceedings 1-6. The procedures in the proceedings under points 7-9 will be up-to-date only after the higher education institution has announced compliance and proceedings 10,12 and 13, only after the internal system of the higher education institution has been brought into conformity. Proceedings 4,7,10 and 11 are proceedings at the request of the higher education institutions.

3. ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND THE METHODOLOGY FOR THEIR EVALUATION

As required by the Act on Quality Assurance, the Agency is responsible for the preparation and approval of accreditation standards, which consist of *Standards for the Internal Quality Assurance System*¹⁰, *Standards for the Study Programme*¹¹ and *Standards for Habilitation and Inaugural Proceedings*¹². *The standards for the internal quality assurance system for higher education* (hereinafter referred to as „the internal system“) mean the set of requirements for the internal system and the way in which it is implemented¹³. Standards for a study programme mean a set of requirements, the fulfillment of which is conditional on the granting of accreditation of the study programme¹⁴ and the agency’s decision on the authorization of the higher education institution to create, implement and modify study programme in the respective field of study and level. The standards for habilitation and inaugural proceedings are a set of requirements, the fulfilment of which is conditional on the granting of accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings. The role of the agency under the Quality Assurance Act was to publish the draft accreditation standards for the public comment procedure by 31 October 2019¹⁵.

When developing the draft standards, the Agency cooperated with leading and recognized experts especially from the university environment and practice in Slovakia and abroad. In the process of preparing standards were involved all stakeholders, in particular university representations, employers’ representatives and students. From the Agency’s point of view, the involvement of all stakeholders is an important aspect for improving the quality of the higher education environment in Slovakia. The whole process of preparing standards was carried out in three phases: the preparatory, approval and introductory phase.

3.1. Preparatory phase and starting points of standards

The preparatory phase was devoted to the collection of information and consultations on external quality assurance systems for higher education abroad and the preparation of the first draft accreditation standards for the public comment procedure.

The Agency started these activities immediately after the constitution of its basic bodies in mid-March 2019. In addition to studying publicly available materials, this phase also included consultations with experts on quality assurance systems and study visits to foreign agencies. Already in April 2019, the agency staff took part in a study visit to the National Accreditation Office in Prague (Czech Republic). Another study visit took place in August 2019, to examine the institutional provision of internal and external quality assurance of higher education in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Internal quality assurance systems have been the subject of visits by University College London and Imperial College London. The issue of external quality assurance was studied at the Office for Students in Bristol, the

¹⁰ [Standards for the internal system of quality assurance of higher education \(saavs.sk\)](https://saavs.sk)

¹¹ [Standards for the Study Programme \(saavs.sk\)](https://saavs.sk)

¹² [Standards for Habilitation and Inaugural Proceedings \(saavs.sk\)](https://saavs.sk)

¹³ Pursuant to § 2 (a) of Act No. 269/2018 Coll. of the Quality Assurance Act

¹⁴ Pursuant to § 30 of the Quality Assurance Act

¹⁵ Pursuant to § 38 (5) of the Quality Assurance Act

Higher Education Statistics Agency in Cheltenham and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in Gloucester. As part of the first phase, the Agency consulted two foreign experts on the preparation of standards. The first expert was Mark Jones of the University of Brighton – a British expert in reviewing national accreditation systems. The second expert, on the recommendation of ENQA, was Achim Hopbach, Executive Director of the Austrian Accreditation Agency and former President of ENQA. Throughout the first phase, the Agency also continuously consulted a national group of experts on quality assurance.

The Executive Board of the Agency (EB SAAHE) paid attention to the preparation of the concept of external quality assurance of higher education and accreditation standards throughout the preparatory phase. This topic was the subject of its eight meeting (Table 3).

| Date | Content | Participants |
|-------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| 17. 4. 2019 | Inclusion of the preparation of accreditation standards in the agency's work schedule | EB SAAHE |
| 16. – 17. 5. 2019 | Discussion about approaches in the development of accreditation standards | EB SAAHE and national expert group |
| 13. 6. 2019 | Discussion on concepts and deadlines of external quality assurance and basic thesis of the draft version of accreditation standards | EB SAAHE and national expert group |
| 11. 7. 2019 | Discussion on the principles of quality assurance of higher education and specific study fields requirements in relation to standards for habilitation and inaugural proceedings | EB SAAHE and national expert group |
| 22. 8. 2019 | Discussion on the definitive setting of accreditation standards and decision on addressing ESG 2015 standards using some of the British approaches in the evaluation of creative activity | EB SAAHE |
| 12. 9. 2019 | Discussion on the first comprehensive proposal for accreditation standards | EB SAAHE |
| 2. 10. 2019 | Discussion on the modified draft version of accreditation standards before providing it for consultation with interested parties | EB SAAHE |
| 24. 10. 2019 | Approval of accreditation standards before they are submitted for public comment procedure | EB SAAHE |

Table 3. Activities of the Executive Board of the Agency during the preparatory phase of accreditation standards

The key decision was taken by the Executive Board on its 6th meeting on 22 August 2019. Based on an evaluation of the experience of the study visit in the UK, its members agreed that accreditation standards would be conceived on the basis of ESG 2015 using some elements of the British system for evaluating the outputs of creative activity. The first comprehensive draft version of accreditation standards was discussed by the Executive Board at its 7th meeting on 12 September 2019. After evaluating the discussion and incorporating the comments of the members of the Executive Board, a new proposal was prepared, which was supplemented by criteria for the evaluation of standards and a glossary. This proposal was approved by the Executive Board at its 8th meeting on 2 October 2019 for submission to stakeholders. After their evaluation and incorporation of comments, a draft accreditation standards for public comment procedure were approved at the 9th meeting of the Executive Board on 24 October 2019. Throughout the preparatory phase, the Agency sought to involve all stakeholders in the process of preparing accreditations standards.

Already during May and June 2019, the Chairman of the Executive Board of the Agency attended meetings of the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions and the Council of Higher Education Institutions as bodies for the representation of higher education institutions in Slovakia. In June 2019, the Agency organized a conference entitled „*Quality of higher education from different points of view*“. Its aim was to launch consultations with stakeholders and to open a public debate on the quality of higher education in Slovakia. The conference was attended by 150 experts. The Minister of Education and Chairman of the Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic for Education, Science, Youth and Sport also attended. The conference presented the European context of higher education quality assurance policy and the panel discussion presented specific views on the quality of higher education institutions in terms of social sciences and humanities, natural sciences, arts, private higher education institutions, employers and students. In September 2019, the Agency held multiple group consultations with 13 experts representing different groups of study fields. The aim of the consultations was to set specific study fields criteria for habilitation and inaugural proceedings. In October 2019, the Agency held several consultations on the draft standards. The consultations involved all higher education authorities – the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the Slovak Rectors’ Conference and the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions, as well as several representatives of employers’ associations – Club 500, Federation of Employers’ Associations of the Slovak Republic, Association of Industrial Unions, Automotive Industry Association, National Union of Employers and Sectoral Councils Alliance.

The submitted proposal of accreditation standards was based on the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area 2015 (ESG)* and took into account the provisions of the Quality Assurance Act. The standards have been designed to:

- a) guarantee the autonomy and responsibility of higher education institutions for ensuring and demonstrating the quality of higher education,
- b) support higher education institutions in improving the quality,
- c) enable higher education institutions to demonstrate the quality of education and compliance with the standards,
- d) allow for the diversity of higher education institutions, study programmes and students,
- e) promote the involvement of all stakeholders in quality assurance processes,
- f) provide unambiguous information and evidence for the Agency’s decision-making,
- g) lead to an appropriate burden and costs for higher education institutions,
- h) ensure transparent, impartial, independent, methodically consistent and professional action by the Agency’s bodies and staff and the members of the review panels.

In accordance with the act, the Agency published draft accreditation standards for public comment procedure on its website on 30 October 2019. This started the second phase of the process of adopting accreditation standards. The deadline for sending comments was 5 December 2019. The publication of the draft standards was immediately communicated to the higher education authorities and ministries.

3.2. Public comment procedure and approval phase of accreditation standards

The second phase was linked to the activities of presenting and explaining the draft

standards to the academic public, evaluating the public comment procedure and focusing on the preparation of the final draft standards for expression to the Ministry of Education.

Following the ministry's statement, its comments were incorporated into the proposal and subsequently the final version of the accreditation standards was approved.

Regarding the publication of the draft standards, the Agency organized a series of professional seminars in Slovakia. The content of these seminars was, in particular, to introduce the concept of draft standards in order to launch a public debate and also to give stakeholders scope for their questions regarding the published draft standards. The introductory seminar took place on 30 October 2019 in Bratislava. Other seminars continued in major higher education centres in Slovakia on 5 November 2019 in Košice, on 11 November 2019 in Žilina and on 15 November 2019 in Banská Bystrica.

The Agency continued to consult on the submitted draft standards. At the same time, the Agency also used participation in several conferences and events to explain to the professional public the principles of the new system of external quality assurance of higher education and to present the draft standards. On 29 October 2019, the Chairman of the Executive Board attended a conference organized by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic entitled „*Will we keep up with innovations to a quality workforce?*“, where he explained changes in the system of external quality assurance of higher education in relation to employers' expectations. On 6 November 2019, the Chairman of the Executive Board discussed the new standards with Sylwia Sitka – Policy Officer for Ireland, Poland and Slovakia Directorate – General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture from the European Commission. On 8 November 2019, the Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board attended a meeting of the Slovak Rectors' Conference in Zvolen with the participation of the Minister of Education and the General Director of the Higher Education Section, where they discussed the draft standards. On 21-23 November 2019, the Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board attended an international conference in Berlin organized by the EQAF European Quality Assurance Forum. As part of the informal discussions, he announced a new system for external quality assurance of higher education to EQAR President Karl Dittrich. On 21 November 2019, the Chairman of the Executive Board attended the 68th meeting of the Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic for Education, Science, Youth and Sport, where he provided information on the preparation of the published draft accreditation standards to the members of the Committee. On the same day, the Chairman of the Executive Board discussed the draft accreditation standards with the deans of faculties at a meeting of the Club of Deans in Banská Bystrica. Following professional seminars on the design of new accreditation standards, a professional meeting with persons working in higher education institutions dealing with internal systems and quality assurance was held at the request of the academic public on 25 November 2019. The lecture was accompanied by a discussion on the draft standards. On 26 November 2019, the Chairman of the Executive Board participated in the Day of Academic Mobility and Internationalization, organized by the Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA); where he presented the draft standards to the vice-rectors of higher education institutions responsible for international cooperation and internationalization. From 26-28 November 2019, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board explained the draft standards to the members of the individual advisory boards of the Council of Higher Education Institutions – the Science, Technology and Arts Board, the Education Board and the Development and Funding Board. On 29 November 2019, the Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board presented the draft standards at the conference *Transformation of Higher Education in the context of the*

development of the information society, organized by the Trade Union of Workers in Education and Science of Slovakia in Košice. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board discussed the draft standards at the plenary session of the Council of Higher Education Institutions on 3 December 2019 in Nitra. On 20 December 2019, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board presented a new system of accreditations at the Conference of Slovak scientists We Live Science 2019, which took place in Bratislava.

| Date | Events | Participants |
|-------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| 30. 10. 2019 | Publication of the draft accreditation standards on the Agency's website, beginning of the public comment procedure | SAAHE |
| November – December 2019 | Presentation of standards to different stakeholders | SAAHE |
| 5. 12. 2019 | Termination of the public comment procedure on the draft accreditation standards | SAAHE |
| 5. – 6. 12. 2019 | Discussion and consultation of draft standards with a foreign expert | SAAHE + Dr. Mark Jones |
| 16. 12. 2019 | Discussion and consultation of draft standards with a foreign expert | SAAHE + Dr. Achim Hopbach |
| December 2019 – February 2020 | Evaluation of comments on the draft accreditation standards | SAAHE |
| 20. 2. 2020 | Approval of the evaluation of the public comment procedure and approval of the modified draft accreditation standards for the purpose of its submission for comments to the Ministry of Education | EB SAAHE |
| 28. 2. 2020 | Submission of draft accreditation standards for comments to the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the SR | SAAHE |
| 2. 6. 2020 | Delivery of the Ministry's statement on the draft accreditation standards | Ministry of Education |
| 4. 6. 2020 | Evaluation of the Ministry's comments on the draft standards and approval of the modified draft accreditation standards | EB SAAHE |
| 4. 6. 2020 | Submission of the revised draft accreditation standards to the Ministry for re-expression | SAAHE |
| 24. 6. 2020 | Delivery of the Ministry's statement on the revised draft accreditation standards | Ministry of Education |
| 2. 7. 2020 | Approval of the final version of the accreditation standards | EB SAAHE |

Table 4: Chronology of key events of the approval phase of adoption of accreditation standards

The public comment procedure on the draft standards was concluded on 5 December 2019. The Agency received 1235 comments from 103 entities. In December 2019 and on January and February 2020, the Agency paid attention to the evaluation of comments on draft standards and further consultations. Consultations involving foreign experts who visited the Agency were of particular importance, namely Mark Jones on 5 and 6 December 2019 and Achim Hopbach on 16 December 2019. In February 2020, consultations were held on the specificities of standards in the field of medical and health disciplines with the Director of the Education Department of the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic and with the Chairman of the Accreditation Commission of the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic and consultations with the Director-General and staff of the Higher Education Section at the Ministry of Education.

At its meeting on 20 February 2020, the Executive Board of the Agency discussed a proposal for the evaluation of comments on draft standards. The comments were of

a differentiated nature and largely reflected the interests of the various stakeholders. On the one hand, general comments were received with a comprehensive scope of the issue, which contained many aspects. These comments were partially accepted because they contained certain aspects that the Agency had taken into account. These comments were the majority. On the other hand, very specific comments were received concerning individual issues which were mostly assessed as accepted or not accepted. The last group consisted of statements or questions which were not of the nature of the comments. From a factual point, the above comments and requirements mainly concerned the issue of staffing of study programmes, requirements for higher education criteria for evaluating the fulfillment of the conditions for obtaining the degrees professor and associate professor, terminological questions and interpretative ambiguities, the specificization of criteria for granting higher education institutions the right to shape and modify study programmes in the respective field of study and level, the specificization of the transition from the previous accreditation system to the new accreditation system standards in the transitional and final provisions of the standards, the extent to which the results of comprehensive accreditation are taken into account in the evaluation of creative activities in the accreditation of third-level study programmes and the accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings. Due to the diversity of the comments, many comments were adversarial. This was most pronounced in the specific comments concerning items and thresholds within the requirements for higher education institutions criteria for evaluating the fulfillment of the conditions for obtaining degrees professor and associate professor and for staffing of study programmes. Out of a total of 1 235 comments, 231 comments were fully accepted (18.7%), 763 comments were partially accepted (61,8 %), 143 comments were not accepted (11,6%) and 98 comments (7,9%) were not comments and were not evaluated. On the basis of the comments received, the Agency decided to recast and reformulate the original draft accreditation standards. The aim of the modification was to clarify the text, to remove assymetric distinguishing levels of standards, delete vague formulations and concepts. The Agency has tended to limit the prescriptive approach by deleting a substantial part of the items with thresholds. The aim of this step was to identify the new quality assurance paradigm of higher education based on the ESG principles, which delegates the primary responsibility for quality assurance to higher education institutions. The Agency believed that the universities needed to be given a wide room for maneuver to convince the public of the effectiveness and efficiency of their internal quality assurance systems. The Agency has therefore decided to replace specific items and thresholds with a system of interlinked principles that guarantee the development of a quality culture within the mission of higher education institutions. The Executive Board approved this revised draft standars and submitted it to the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the SR for comments on 28 February 2020.

A consultation meeting of representatives of the Agency and the Ministry of Education was held on 25 May 2020 with the participation of the State Secretary responsible for higher education institutions and the Director-General of the Legislative and Legal Section of the Ministry. The Chairman of the Executive Board informed the members of the Committee of the National Council of the SR for Education, Science, Youth and Sport about the current state of approval of standards at the meeting on 2 June 2020 with the participation of the minister of Education, representatives of university representation bodies and representatives of the Agency. On 2 June 2020, the Agency received a statement from the Ministry of Education on the draft standards. In the statement, the Ministry made 9 comments on the draft standards for the internal system, 5 comments on the draft

standards for the study programme and 7 comments on the draft standards for habilitation and inaugural proceedings. At its meeting on 4 June 2020, the Executive Board addressed the Ministry's statement on the draft standards. It accepted all comments made by the Ministry on the draft standards for the internal system and standards for the study programme. Regarding the comments on the draft standards for habilitation and inaugural proceedings, it accepted 6 comments and did not accept 1 comment. The Executive Board approved the revised draft standards for re-expression to the Ministry and submitted the revised draft standards to the Ministry for re-expression.

On 24 June 2020, the Agency received a statement from the Ministry on the revised draft standards. The Ministry stated that it had not identified any deficiencies in the draft standards and that it had no comments on the proposal. Subsequently, the draft standards were submitted to the Executive Board for approval. The Executive Board adopted the standards on its 18th meeting on 2 July 2020.

3.3. Introductory phase of accreditation standards

The third phase includes activities related to the introduction of accreditation standards into the implementation process. This phase is practically lasting until now and we expect it to be finalized by the statutory deadline at which higher education institutions are obliged to notify the Agency that they harmonized their internal quality assurance systems with standards.

The accreditation standards entered into force on the date of approval. They entered into force on 1 September 2020. This gave the higher education institutions a period of 24 months to comply with standards. It is the duty of higher education institutions to align the internal quality assurance system with the standards for the internal system, which also implies the alignment of study programmes with the standards for the study programme and the alignment of habilitation and inaugural proceedings with the standards for habilitation and inaugural proceedings. Higher education institutions shall notify the Agency of compliance with the standards by 1 September 2020 at the latest and request the Agency to review the internal system by 31 December 2022 at the latest.

The Agency organized a range of events to present accreditation standards and provide guidance to individual stakeholders with the aim to their optimal understanding and correct implementation. The first event was a conference on the introduction of accreditation standards organized by the Agency on 23 and 24 September 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference took place in a virtual space, with records of individual speeches being published on the Agency's website¹⁶. Another format offered by the Agency included consultations for individual higher education institutions on standards and guidelines on accreditation applications. Higher education institutions had the opportunity to send questions to which agency staff provided them with answers and guidance in an interactive discussion. This possibility has been used by most higher education institutions. From these questions and answers, on the Agency's website was created the FAQ section, ensuring access by all higher education institutions and other stakeholders to relevant answers and guidelines.¹⁷ Other used formats were thematically specific consultations and

¹⁶ [Conference records – SAAHE/Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education \(saavs.sk\)](#)

¹⁷ [Frequently asked questions by participants in consultations – SAAHE / Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education \(saavs.sk\)](#)

panel discussions intended for all higher education institutions and other stakeholders. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they took place in a virtual space as well. In addition to the Agency's staff, the foreign and domestic experts and university representatives who shared their experiences also participated in the role of presenters and panelists. Between February 2021 and November 2021, 14 thematic consultations took place. Higher education institutions have shown great interest in this format. They were regularly attended by 200-300 participants. Records and information from these events are published on the Agency's website.¹⁸

3.4. Change of standards after amendment of the Act on Quality Assurance

On 5 November 2020, the National Council of the Slovak Republic approved an amendment to the Act on Quality Assurance by adding a sentence in §36 para.2 of the Act that allowed higher education institutions to apply for accreditation of a joint study programme, provided that in the respective field of study and level it is already carrying out a study programme that is not a joint study programme. This was a reflection on the requirements of higher education institutions implementing various projects, the outcome of which was to create a joint study programme in an international or domestic consortium of higher education institutions. It was therefore necessary to adapt the scope of the standards for the review of joint study programmes. The Agency has prepared a draft appendix 1 to the standards for the study programme. The Agency assumed that joint study programmes would be covered by the Standards for Quality Assurance of joint study programmes in the European Higher Education Area and generally binding legislation. At its meeting on 17 December 2020, the Executive Board of the Agency approved the draft Appendix 1 to the Standards for study programme for submission for the public comment procedure. The public comment procedure on this proposal ran from 4 January to 3 February 2021. The draft proposal received 24 comments from 8 entities. The Executive Board addressed the evaluation of the comments at its meeting on 18 February 2021. Of the total number of comments, it accepted 5, did not accept 16 and evaluated 3 comments as not related to the proposal in question. Subsequently, the Executive Board of the Agency approved the modified version of Appendix 1 in order to submit it for comments to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education's comments on draft Appendix 1 were delivered to the Agency on 3 May 2021. Subsequently, at its meeting on 6 May 2021, the Executive Board of the Agency approved the Appendix 1, thereby becoming effective. Appendix 1 to the standards for the study programme¹⁹ entered into force on 1 June 2021.

3.5. Methodology for the evaluation of standards

The methodology for the evaluation of standards (hereinafter referred to as „methodology“) means a set of procedures, criteria and indicators through which the review panels of the Executive Board of the Agency and staff of the Agency evaluate the fulfillment of standards and measures to ensure compliance of the internal system or its implementation with the standards for the internal system.

The preparation of the methodology was carried out in parallel with the preparation

¹⁸ [Past events – SAAHE / Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education](#)

¹⁹ [Dodatok-c.1-k-standardom-pre-studijny-program-06052021.pdf](#)

of accreditation standards. In the process of preparing the draft methodology, the agency held consultations with representatives of higher education institutions and other stakeholders. Since the beginning of May 2020, intensive individual and group consultations with experienced domestic and foreign reviewers and other experts on external quality assurance of higher education have been launched. On 14 July 2020, the Agency announced on its website the launch of consultations to prepare a methodology with external stakeholders and the professional public. Subsequently, a series of consultations took place with representatives of higher education institutions and other stakeholders, namely the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions, Federation of Employers' Associations of the Slovak Republic, the National Union of Employers, the Council of Higher Education Institutions, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Sectoral Councils Alliance and the Higher Education Section of the Ministry of Education. On the basis of an evaluation of these discussions, a final draft methodology was drawn up, which was approved at the meeting of the Executive Board of the Agency on 17 September 2020. The methodology for the evaluation of standards²⁰ entered into force on the date of approval.

On the basis of suggestions from higher education institutions, in early 2021 the Agency proceeded to supplement the methodology in order to unify the conditions for scientists in higher education institutions and research institutions (external educational institutions) concerning the training of dissertations and to clarify the interpretation of the conditions for fulfilling qualifications for the filling the positions of associate professor and professor in the case of persons who received the artistic and pedagogical title of associate professor and have already filled the position. Further change was led by the Agency's efforts to give higher education institutions greater flexibility in nominating persons providing profile subjects to the areas of assessing the level of creative activity. The amendment to the methodology for the evaluation of standards²¹ was approved by the Executive Board of the Agency at its meeting on 18 February 2021. Its consolidated version is published on the agency's website²².

²⁰ [Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards](#)

²¹ [Amendments to the methodology for the evaluation of standards of 18 February 2021](#)

²² [Methodology for the evaluation of standards as amended on 18 February 2021](#)

4. CHANGES TO INTERNAL LEGISLATION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS CAUSED BY THE NEW ACCREDITATION SYSTEM

4.1. Legislative framework for quality assurance until 30 October 2018

Due to complexity, it should be noted that the effort to grasp the quality of higher education with the concept of an internal quality system and its implementation existed even before November 2018. It was an effort to bring Slovak higher education closer to European level, which has been characterized by external quality reviews by independent agencies relying on uniform standards (ESG) since 2005. A formal version of this effort in Slovakia was the enactment of a mandatory regulation within the framework of the internal legislation of the higher education institutions. It first appeared already in 2013, since the originally existing §87a *Interim Quality Assessment of the provided education* was revised and its name changed to *Internal Quality System*. Thus, according to the revised Section 87a of the Act on Higher Education, since 1 January 2013 there was an obligation for higher education institutions to have an internal quality system. The first paragraph was key, explicitly declaring that „Higher education institution is responsible for ensuring the quality of the provided higher education“. According to paragraph 2 of this section: „A higher education institution must have developed, implemented, used and functional internal quality system,...“ According to paragraph 4 of this section, the internal quality system should be an internal regulation of the higher education institution. However, such an internal regulation was not explicitly included in § 15 *Internal Regulations of a Public Higher Education Institution* or in § 48 *Internal Regulations of a Private Higher Education Institution*. This was an obvious inconsistency which reduced the importance of the standard thus established in the structure of the internal regulations of the university. Internal regulations, which primarily include the statute of the university, form the basic axis of the internal legislation of each higher education institution.

However, a fundamental deficiency was that the requirements for the Internal quality system, as specified in paragraphs 4-6 of §87a, did not refer to any uniform standards or contain a closer specification of the obligations imposed on the university. An unambiguous external review of compliance with such a loosely defined internal quality system based on a uniform evaluation methodology was not defined. Although the Accreditation Commission had the competence to review the internal quality system and its application within the framework of comprehensive accreditation and to order the higher education authority to eliminate deficiencies, there are no known cases that this ever happened.

The reflection of this legislative change by universities was mostly formal. It was based on an effort to meet all the conditions of the expected comprehensive accreditation, which took place in the years 2014-2016. In most cases, an internal rule called the „internal quality system“ was approved in the academic boards or scientific councils of universities during the year of 2014. In some cases, the statute of the university has also been amended to ensure that the existence of a new regulation has anchoring and support. In terms of content, the new regulation did not exactly „fit“ into existing processes at university or faculty level in the field of higher education provision.

It referred to the responsibilities of the existing university and faculty structures (bureaus) to

which new tasks were also assigned. In a situation where it was not clear who, and how it would review the functionality and implementation of such an internal system, it was usually a formal regulation that remained unchanged and more reflective in the internal legislation of higher education institutions until the adoption of the new legislation at the end of 2018.

Unfortunately, even today, there is internal legislation on the quality of higher education in some public and most private and state higher education institutions, which relies on the repealed (1 November 2018) §87a of the Higher Education Act.

4.2. Legislative framework for quality assurance from 1 November 2018

The amendment to the Act on Higher Education Institutions No. 131/2002 Coll. on higher education institutions and on amendments to certain acts as amended (hereinafter referred to as the „Act on Higher Education Institutions“), effective from 1 November 2018 established a clear obligation of the higher education institution to have an „internal quality assurance system“. Thus, for public (reasonably state) higher education institutions, §15 of the *Internal Regulations of a Public Higher Education Institution* para.1(b). In the case of private universities §48 of the *Internal regulations of a private higher education institution*. Directly, the law allows that the internal system can be regulated by several regulations. However, it is important to stress out that this internal regulation is approved by the Scientific Council of the Higher Education Institution after the statement of its academic senate. The specific procedure is at state higher education institutions, where this internal regulation is approved (registered) by the relevant ministry. This formal and statutory procedure cannot be circumvented and its observance is a necessary condition for the existence of an internal quality assurance system at the given higher education institution.

4.3. Changes to internal legislation at higher education institutions

The relevant legislative framework and the resulting legal obligations of universities accelerated their activities towards updating and aligning internal quality assurance regulations with the Higher Education Institutions Act, the Quality Assurance Act and the standards issued by the Agency. This activity is visible from publicly available sources of higher education institutions and there is no doubt that it is induced by the above-mentioned boundary conditions. All approved internal rules on quality assurance refer directly to the Quality Assurance Act and to the standards adopted by the Agency.

By the end of November 2021, a total of 17 higher education institutions had adopted in their internal legislation an internal quality assurance regulation (or several internal regulations) directly reflecting the current legislative framework. Of this set, most of the higher education institutions were public (15), 1 state and 1 private higher education institution. In several cases, the statute of the university has also been amended to support the new legislation and in cases where the internal quality assurance system is formed by the assembly of several separate internal regulations (e.g. Slovak Technical University in Bratislava, Prešov University in Prešov, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice). For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that most universities have included the existence of an internal quality system in their statutes a long time ago, due to the legislative change described in section 4.1.

The formal adoption of an internal regulation defining and implementing an internal

quality assurance system at a higher education institution is a necessary but not sufficient act. The standards for the internal system issued by the Agency require not only the introduction of formalized procedures, but also their observance, continuous monitoring and periodic evaluation of their implementation. There is therefore no doubt that, in order to review the compliance of the university's internal quality assurance system with standards, it is necessary to examine its functionality in this regard as well. Longer implementation of the established regulation and immediate experience with its application would allow the university to detect its possible deficiencies and make appropriate corrections.

In this respect, it is worrying that (analyzing publicly available information sources) 5 public higher education institutions, 2 state and 9 private higher education institutions have not completed the formal aspect of internal legislation, which is necessary condition for carrying out their main activity. Almost half of higher education institutions either do not have an internal quality assurance system under the current legislation or are out of date, as it relies on and refers to the repealed legislation (described in section 4.1.).

4.4. Formal characteristics of internal university quality assurance systems

The Act on Higher Education Institutions, the Act on Quality Assurance and standards issued by the Agency provide for an internal regulation – a system of quality assurance, the method of its adoption and thus a position in the hierarchy of internal legislation of the higher education institution. However, they do not target a university in how many regulations it is made up of. Most higher education institutions have chosen the philosophy of one internal regulation with the ambition to create a consistent system in fulfilling standards for the internal system, standards for the study programme and a complete system of internal quality assurance.

The internal quality assurance system brings systematic changes to the management of higher education institutions' processes, especially in the area of the main activity and thus the provision of higher education. The formal form of these changes is the establishment of new bodies (committees) in the management structure of higher education institutions with new competencies. „Quality councils“ are being formally introduced. They are mostly advisory bodies of the Rector as initiative and control bodies to ensure and evaluate the internal system in the field of quality assurance of provided higher education. There are also „(internal) accreditation boards“ whose task is to create, approve, implement and modify study programmes at higher education level. They also formally address the provision of monitoring and continuous evaluation.

In general, it can be concluded that the adoption of new internal legislation at higher education institutions, where this process has already taken place, has been a difficult task. The result will be a significant change in the processes and structure of responsibilities at the different levels of management, with a major impact on the functioning of the higher education institutions.

5. PREPARATION OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Preparation of external quality assurance is carried out in accordance with the National Action Plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic – [National Action Plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions – SAAHE / Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education \(saavs.sk\)](#). The National Action Plan was prepared by the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education and the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. The Action Plan is the outcome of the international project Support countries and their higher education quality assurance agencies in achieving compliance with ESG 2015 ([SEQA-ESG](#)) with the support of the European Union’s Erasmus+ programme. The action plan was discussed with representatives of higher education representatives (Slovak Rectors’ Conference, Council of Higher Education Institutions of the Slovak Republic and Student Council of Higher Education Institutions), representatives of employers (Federation of Employers’ Associations of the Slovak Republic, National Union of Employers, Project Sector-Driven Innovations) and was approved by ENQA.

5.1. Agency’s activities in the preparation of external quality assurance

In accordance with national and international requirements, the Agency carries out or will carry out external quality assurance activities and other support activities related to the transformation and development of internal higher education quality assurance systems and the improvement of the quality of higher education.

| External quality assurance activities | Other activities |
|--|--|
| <p>Within the ESG:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accreditation of study programmes pursuant to § 30 Act No. 269/2018 - Prior consent to the modification of a new study programme pursuant to § 30 para. 9 - Review of the compliance of the implementation of the (new) study programme with the submitted application for accreditation of the study programme and the standards for the study programme pursuant to § 30 para. 11 and the decision to remove the restriction to modify the study programme and create study programme in the field and level. - Review of the internal quality assurance system – § 24 - Activities resulting from corrective measures of conformity review pursuant to § 25: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verification of the measures resulting from the regulation to remedy the deficiencies – § 26 - Assessment of the draft modification of the study programme in connection with the measure of suspension of the implementation of the study programme – § 27 - Ordering the cancellation of the study programme and cancellation of the study programme – § 28 | <p>Consultations on standards for higher education institutions and public</p> <p>Events (conferences, discussions, seminars, joint consultations,...) in the process of aligning study programmes and internal systems with the standards</p> <p>Student Satisfaction Survey (Academic Quarter of an Hour)</p> <p>Thematic analyses</p> |

- approval and monitoring of the action plan in relation to the restriction of the establishment and regulation of study programme – § 29.
- Supervision of compliance with standards for internal system - § 24 para. 2.
- Extraordinary review of the internal system – own – initiative procedure – §24 para. 3

Outside the ESG:

- Procedure for granting accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings – § 31
- Withdrawal of accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings – § 32
- Cancellation of accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings – § 32a
- Granting of state consent – § 33
- Procedure on its own initiative at the time when the information was submitted by the higher education institution that it had harmonized the internal system – § 35 para. 14.
- Verification of the outcome of the measures taken by higher education institutions to eliminate deficiencies from previous accreditations – § 35 para. 6.

When planning, developing and implementing external quality assurance system, the Agency took into account the requirements for internal quality assurance policies, structures and processes as set out in Part 1 of the ESG, as enshrined in the [Standards for the Study Programme](#) and the [Standards for the Internal System](#) and their effectiveness. A specific part of the requirements affecting external quality assurance procedures in Slovakia includes [Standards for habilitation and inaugural proceedings](#). The standards are based on the basic framework of ESG Part 1 and specify its wording in accordance with the requirements for quality development priorities of Slovak higher education institutions (ESG requirements 2.1).

The procedures, criteria and indicators through which the Review Panels of the Executive Board of the Agency and the staff of the Agency evaluate the fulfilment of those standards and measures to ensure compliance of the internal system or its implementation with the internal system standards are part of the [Methodology for the Evaluation of Standards](#) (hereinafter referred to as „methodology“) (ESG requirements 2.2.).

The methodology was prepared in accordance with § 4 para.2 (e) of point 2 of the Quality Assurance Act. Stakeholders, representatives of higher education institutions, students, employers were involved in the development of the methodology (see the [Agency's Annual Report 2020, p.15](#)). The procedures, criteria and indicators set out in the methodology should be applied appropriately depending on the type, requirements and nature of the procedure, taking into account the diversity of the higher education institution or study programme. The fees for external quality assurance operations are determined by the Schedule of Fees for the Agency's operations. In calculating the fees, account was taken on the Agency's estimated costs associated with the Agency's activities.

5.2. Brief description of external quality assurance activities and timeframe for their implementation

1. Accreditation activities of study programmes pursuant to § 30 of Act No. 269/2018 Coll.

The Agency performs activities of accreditation of the study programme in order to review the compliance of the study programme with the standards for the study programme in the different stages of its life cycle and to verify the assumptions of the higher education institution to independently modify the study programme and create study programmes in the relevant field and level.

| | |
|--|----------------|
| a) Review of the application for accreditation of a study programme pursuant to § 30 para.1 of the Act on Quality Assurance | March 2021 |
| b) Granting of prior consent to the modification of the study programme pursuant to § 30 para.9 of the Act on Quality Assurance | June 2021 |
| c) Review of the compliance of the implementation of the (new) study programme with the submitted application for accreditation of the study programme and the standards for the study programme pursuant to § 30 para. 11 and the decision to remove the restriction to modify the study programme and create study programmes in the field and level | September 2024 |

2. Internal quality assurance system conformity review activities pursuant to § 24 of the Act

The objective of the internal system assessment shall be a comprehensive assessment of the compliance of the internal system with the agency's standards. When assessing, in addition to compliance of internal system policies, standards and processes with internal system standards, the Agency shall also evaluate:

- Compliance of the implemented study programmes with the standards for the study programme, and
- Compliance with the requirements of standards for habilitation and inaugural proceedings.

If the internal system or its implementation does not comply with the standards for the internal system, the Agency shall also impose corrective measures and carry out review activities resulting from the reviewing of corrective measures (activities b. to e.). The activities of the assessment of selected measures were implemented by the agency already in 2020 in connection with the verification of the result of the adopted measures of higher education institutions in the elimination of deficiencies from previous accreditations pursuant § 35 para. 6, which were mentioned in the statement of the Accreditation Commission.

| | |
|---|----------------|
| a) Review of the internal quality assurance system § 24 | September 2022 |
| b) Verification of the measures resulting from the regulation of remedying deficiencies – § 26 | September 2023 |
| c) Review of the draft modification of study programme in connection with the measure suspending the implementation of study programme – § 27 | January 2020 |
| d) Ordering the cancellation of study programme and cancellation of program pursuant to §28 | September 2023 |

| | |
|--|----------------|
| e) Approval and monitoring of the action plan in relation to restrictions on the establishment and regulation of study programmes – § 29 | September 2023 |
| Other internal system review activities: | |
| f) The Agency shall supervise the fulfilment of internal system standards pursuant to § 24 para. 2. at least every two years on the basis of data from the Agency. | January 2025 |
| g) The Agency may initiate an extraordinary review procedure for the internal system on its own initiative – § 24 para. 3. | September 2022 |

Other external quality assurance activities outside the ESG:

3. Review of compliance of habilitation and inaugural proceedings pursuant to § 31 and § 32 of the Act

The Agency accepts applications for accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings if the higher education institution is entitled to create study programmes.

| | |
|--|----------------|
| a) Procedure for granting accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings - § 31 | September 2023 |
| b) Withdrawal of accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings - § 32 | January 2022 |
| c) Cancellation of accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings - § 32a | January 2022 |

4. Procedure on its own initiative at the time when information was submitted by the higher education institution that it harmonized the internal system pursuant to § 35 ods. 14

| | |
|---|--------------|
| The Agency may initiate proceedings on its own initiative at the time of submission of information by the higher education institution that it has brought the internal system in line with the standards for the internal system if it has reasonable grounds to suspect that the HEI is not complying with the legislation or its internal regulations. | January 2021 |
|---|--------------|

5. The granting of state consent pursuant to § 33

| | |
|---|--------------|
| The Agency shall comment on the granting or non-granting of state approval on the basis of a comprehensive review of the application and the internal system. The application for state approval is submitted to the Agency by a legal entity together with an application for accreditation of at least one study programme. | January 2022 |
|---|--------------|

5.3. External quality assurance processes

The Agency develops external quality assurance processes (ESG requirements 2.3) in order to increase the effectiveness of review on the part of both the Agency and the higher education institution. It accepts applications and manages external quality assurance processes electronically in the Agency's information system.

The Agency receives applications electronically in the Agency's Information System (IS SAAVS). Guidelines on how to apply for external quality assurance activities, including forms, are published on the Agency's website in the section <https://saavs.sk/sk/ziadosti/>. For

more important information, see FAQ (frequently asked questions).

The processes of review of study programmes, internal quality assurance systems and habilitation and inaugural proceedings are based on the Methodology for Evaluation of Standards and are further elaborated in the manuals for administration of accreditation procedures of SAAHE.

The review activities take place in 4 stages:

1. stage – examination of application, the application documents and the information available,
2. stage – on-site review – by visiting a HEI,
3. stage – the processing of the evaluation report by the Executive Board’s review panel (in the case of accreditation or review of the internal system, it is part of the opinion of the HEI,
4. stage – the opinion or decision of the Executive Board of the Agency.

Review activities related to corrective measures are carried out on the spot where no other verification of the measure is possible. When reviewing the internal system of quality assurance of a higher education institution or an application for accreditation, the relevant application of the higher education institution and the assessment process includes an internal evaluation report (self-evaluation report) pursuant to § 24 para. 4 and § 30 para. 2 of the Quality Assurance Act and other documents demonstrating compliance with the relevant standards.

The review panel, in accordance with the methodology, develop an evaluation report on the higher education institution’s application or initiative on the basis of which the Executive Board shall decide or express its opinion. When developing the evaluation report, it shall be based on an expert review of the application documents, the information obtained during the university visit, the available data and the consultation with stakeholders. The higher education institution has the right to give an opinion on the evaluation report within at least 15 working days from the date of delivery of the evaluation report.

A party to proceeding shall have the right to object to decisions or statements of the Executive Board. The Board of Appeal expresses its opinion on the objection in accordance with § 22 of the Quality Assurance Act and [The Rules of Procedure of the SAAHE Commission for the Assessment of Objections](#). Since the standards took effect, the Board of Appeal has accepted 2 objections to the decisions of the Executive Board.

5.4. List of reviewers and review panels of the Agency’s Executive Board

For the purpose of assessing a specific application by a higher education institution, the Executive Board of the Agency shall set up a review panel of persons from the agency’s list of reviewers. As of 1 December 2021, 1 442 reviewers are registered in the list of reviewers, of which 1 139 are trained:

- 233 foreign trained reviewers (126 from the Czech Republic),
- 104 students;
- 214 professional experts (180 in combination with academic practice).

In 2021, the Agency modified the way reviewers are obtained by targeting professionals in fields with insufficient representation of experts.

When setting up review panels, account shall be taken on the type of procedure, the specificity of the field of study and the profile of the reviewer. Only a reviewer who has competence for the reviewing, has completed the relevant training of the Agency, is not in a conflict of interest and has consented to be included in the review panel (ESG 2.4 requirements) may be a member of the review panel. The rules for the establishment of the review panel specify [The Principles for listing, delisting and setting up executive board review panels](#), and [The Regulation Adjustment of conflicts of interest of members of collective bodies, members of executive board review panels and staff](#)). The Chairman and the members of the Review Panel are appointed and dismissed by the Chairman of the Executive Board with the prior consent of the Executive Board (§ 8 para. 1 of the Quality Assurance Act). The review panel includes at least one student and professional expert (except for procedures for granting or withdrawing the accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings).

| | | | |
|--|-----|--|----|
| 1/ Architecture and urbanism | 10 | 25/ Nursing | 19 |
| 2/ Security sciences | 21 | 26/ Political sciences | 34 |
| 3/ Biology | 31 | 27/ Agriculture and landscapes | 24 |
| 4/ Biotechnologies | 3 | 28/ Food | 12 |
| 5/ Transport | 14 | 29/ Midwifery | 3 |
| 6/ Wood sciences | 3 | 30/ Law | 49 |
| 7/ Ecological and environmental sciences | 35 | 31/ Spatial planning | 1 |
| 8/ Economics and management | 184 | 32/ Psychology | 10 |
| 9/ Electrical engineering | 18 | 33/ Social work | 28 |
| 10/ Pharmacy | 6 | 34/ Sociology and social anthropology | 17 |
| 11/ Philology | 56 | 35/ Construction | 12 |
| 12/ Philosophy | 26 | 36/ Engineering | 70 |
| 13/ Physics | 18 | 37/ Theology | 12 |
| 14/ Geodesy and cartography | 5 | 38/ Teaching and pedagogical sciences | 71 |
| 15/ Historical sciences | 23 | 39/ Art | 33 |
| 16/ Chemical engineering and technology | 7 | 40/ Sports science | 11 |
| 17/ Chemistry | 25 | 41/ Arts and culture sciences | 12 |
| 18/ Informatics | 43 | 42/ Earth sciences | 30 |
| 19/ Cybernetics | 7 | 43/ Public health | 20 |
| 20/ Forestry | 3 | 44/ Veterinary medicine | 9 |
| 21/ Logopedia and therapeutic pedagogy | 4 | 45/ General medicine | 23 |
| 22/ Mathematics | 13 | 46/ Medical sciences | 14 |
| 23/ Media and communication studies | 22 | 47/ Extraction and processing of earth resources | 8 |
| 24/ Defence and military | 1 | 48/ Dentistry | 2 |

In 2021, the Agency set up 82 review panels; 4 review panels in the context of the examination of the complaint; 8 review panels in connection with the review of the draft modification of the study programme. The review panel included 284 reviewers from the list of reviewers, of which:

- 202 reviewers worked in one review panel,
- 64 reviewers worked in two review panels,
- 28 reviewers worked in three or more review panels.

A party to the proceeding may make a reasoned objection of bias against a member of the review panel within five working days of the date on which he was notified of the composition of the review panel. Higher education institutions have objected to bias against a member of the review panel in 6 proceedings.

5.5. Digital support

Preparation to cope with a significant range of parallel proceedings required the deployment of information systems and the building of fully digital processes. Digitalization is also supported by a legislative framework that imposes submission of applications for accreditation by higher education institutions in an electronic way. In accordance with general legislation on digitization of public administration, commercially available

information systems have been deployed for individual administrative activities of the Agency as a legal entity. Its own specific accreditation processes, including communication with reviewers and HEIs, were provided by gradually building their own information system by module in order of current needs.

The modular Information System of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education ([IS SAAVŠ – Information System SAAVŠ \(saavs.sk\)](http://saavs.sk)) was built mainly to increase the efficiency of external review activities. The basis of IS is the open source tool Redmine. Modules have been implemented into this environment, which extend its functionality to match the processes and internal guidelines of the SAAHE. IS is operated in a virtualized OpenStack cloud computing environment.

IS is designed for SAAHE employees, SAAHE reviewers and university officials. IS is used to support and manage SAAHE processes in individual modules:

The application modul is used to submit applications by HEIs:

- Applications for accreditation of a new study programme pursuant to § 30,
- Applications for accreditation of a new teacher/translation combination study programme in combination pursuant to § 30,
- Applications for accreditation of a new joint study programme pursuant to § 30 a § 36,
- Draft modification of the study programme pursuant to § 27,
- Application for prior consent to the modification of the study programme pursuant to § 30 para.9.

The Applications module supports the SAAHE procedures. It allows the combining of the applications under assessment into proceedings, the creation of review panels, the allocation of the applications under assessment to the review panels, the preparation of documents for the meetings of the Executive Board. It also supports communication within the reviewpanel during the assessment, as well as the vote on the proposed evaluation.

The Reviewers module consists of two parts: candidates for assessors and a list of assessors. It processes the list of assessors and create review panels.

The Upload requests module is used to process reports on the outcome of measures taken to eliminate deficiencies in relation to the study programme or in relation to habilitation and inaugural proceedings.

The AK Applications module shall include applications and procedures linked to reports on the outcome of the measures taken to eliminate deficiencies in relation to the study programme or in relation to habilitation and inaugural proceedings.

Module Complaints – it records complaints received by SAAHE. There are also cases where the SAAHE acts on its own initiative.

The Module Meetings of the Executive Board enables the management of EB meetings with an emphasis on the preparation and sharing of documents discussed at meetings.

The Training module enables the organization of trainings for reviewers, registration for trainings and records of completed trainings.

Feedback allows for automated sending and evaluation of the feedback of the parties after the end of the review procedure.

The IS Reminders, IS Questions modules are used to enter IS reminders, suggestions for improvements, and error reporting. The Module Comments is intended for internal needs of SAAHE. The Information System Questions module is designed for members of review panels and applicants.

6. PERFORMANCE OF THE AGENCY

According to the Act on Quality Assurance, the performance of the Agency's competence (§ 21 et seq.) is provided mainly through procedures that start at the request of the higher education institution or the applicant for state approval, or on the agency's own initiative. In the period until the alignment of higher education institutions with the Act on Quality Assurance and standards, other proceedings are carried out in accordance with the transitional provisions of this Act. The procedure usually ends after the Executive Board of the agency adopts the conclusion in the form of a resolution and subsequently a written decision or a statement is drawn up and delivered to the higher education authority or, where appropriate, the Agency enters the relevant register.

According to the transitional provisions of the Act on Quality Assurance, the Agency began its activities by taking over the agenda of the previous Accreditation Commission, an advisory body of the Government of the Slovak Republic, including not completed proceedings by 31 December 2019.

6.1. Proceedings initiated under previous rules

The Agency reviewed 2 applications for accreditation of a new study programme according to the transitional provision of § 37 para. 2 of the Quality Assurance Act. The higher education institution submitted a request to the Accreditation Commission for a review of the competence to carry out a new study programme. At its last 114th meeting on 6-7 November 2019, the Accreditation Commission did not adopt a resolution and suspended the sitting on the request in question. In view of the fact that this procedure was not completed by 31 December 2019, when the Accreditation Commission also ceased its activities, all further actions in relation to the above-mentioned application of the higher education institution were carried out by the Agency. The Agency complied with both requests of the higher education institution and granted the university's decision the right to award graduates a corresponding academic degree.

6.2. Verification of the results of the measures taken in previous accreditations

In the years 2020 – 2021, the Agency dealt mainly with the verification of the results of measures taken by higher education institutions in relation to deficiencies reported by the Accreditation Commission in its statement on previous accreditations. These were reviews of the competence of the higher education institution to carry out the relevant study programme or habilitation procedure and the procedure for appointing professors (hereinafter referred to as the „inaugural proceeding“), which resulted from the conclusions of accreditation under the previous legislation. Due to the adoption of the Act on Quality assurance and the transfer of rights and obligations from the Accreditation Commission to the Agency from 1 January 2020, the results of the adopted measures of higher education institutions to eliminate deficiencies within the meaning of the transitional provision § 35 para. 6 of the Quality Assurance Act are verified by the Agency at the previous request of the Ministry of Education, to which higher education institutions send reports on the measures taken to eliminate deficiencies.

The higher education institution was obliged to report to the Ministry of Education on the measures taken to eliminate deficiencies (hereinafter referred to as „the report“) according to the regulations in force until 31 October 2018 due to non-compliance with any of the criteria or at the same time several criteria for accreditation of higher education study programmes. The result of the university’s measures taken to eliminate the deficiencies was verified by the Agency following the criteria issued according to the regulations in force until 31 October 2018.

Between 2020 and 2021, the Ministry of Education forwarded to the Agency to process 299 university reports from the previous accreditation period. Of the total number of reports received by the Agency, 264 were related to the elimination of deficiencies in relation to the implementation of study programmes and 35 were related to the elimination of deficiencies in relation to the implementation of the habilitation and inaugural proceeding.

Verification of the results of the elimination of deficiencies in relation to the implementation of study programmes

In 2020-2021, the Agency reviewed 264 reports concerning the elimination of deficiencies in relation to the implementation of study programmes. The most common reason for reporting higher education institutions in relation to the implementation of study programmes reviewed by the Agency was non-compliance with the criterion of **KSP-A6** *Guaranteeing the quality and development of the study programme*. This criterion was the reason for reporting to the higher education institution in 257 cases.

Other criteria on the basis of which higher education institutions were obliged to report to the Ministry of Education in relation to the implementation of the relevant study programme due to their insufficient implementation were the criteria:

- **KSP-A1** *Level of research or artistic activity of the higher education institution and workplaces providing the implementation of the study programme,*
- **KSP-A3** *The structure of the lecturers, respectively university teachers working in the main forms of teaching depending on the specificities of the field of study (qualification structure)*
- **KSP-A4** *Adequacy of the number of university teachers, researchers or artistic staff conducting final papers in terms of number of students,*
- **KSP-A6** *Guaranteeing the quality and development of the study programme,*
- **KSP-B1** *Fulfillment of the content of the field of study (§50 para.5(c) of Act No. 131/2002 Coll.)*
- **KSP-B8** *Suitability of requirements for applicants and how to choose them to ensure that applicants with the necessary skills and prerequisites can get into the study,*
- **KSP-B9** *Sufficiency of requirements for successful completion of studies in terms of the quality of the educational process, ways of ensuring the level of quality of the educational process, including how to rate state examinations, mainly final exams.*
- **KSP-B11** *Level of all graduates (from best to weakest) due to standards requirements of quality of the educational process in the respective field, compliance of the level of knowledge, abilities and skills of graduates with the graduate profile and their expected method of application, application of graduates in accor. with the prerequisites.*

In two cases, the current non-compliance with the KSP-A1, KSP-A3, KSP-B1, KSP-B9 criteria was found, in two cases the simultaneous non-compliance with the KSP-A6 and KSP-A4 criteria and, in two cases, the simultaneous non-compliance with the KSP-B8 and KSP-B11 criteria.

After verifying the result of the adopted measures of higher education institutions, the Agency stated in relation to the implementation of 242 study programmes that the HEI meets the relevant accreditation criteria after the adoption of the measures. The Agency subsequently marked the cancellation of the time limit in the register of study programmes if the higher education institution's obligation arose due to a time limit of rights and renewed the granted right if the obligation of the higher education institution arose due to the suspension of the granted right.

After verifying the outcome of the adopted measures of higher education institutions in relation to the implementation of 22 study programmes, the Agency concluded that the higher education institution did not meet the relevant accreditation criteria after the adoption of the measures, which put the implementation of these study programmes on hold. In all cases, the Agency has suspended the implementation of study programmes in connection with non-compliance with the requirements of the KSP-A6 criterion

Of these 22 agency-suspended study programmes in 20 cases, higher education institutions were obliged to report to the Ministry of Education due to the time limit of the ability to carry out study programmes, since the guarantors of these study programmes reached the age of 70 years in the respective academic year²³. In these cases, the Agency reviewed mainly the newly nominated guarantors of the study programmes submitted by the higher education institution to the Agency. The reasons on the basis of which the Agency found insufficient compliance with the above criterion for accreditation of higher education study programmes was the proposed guarantor of the relevant study programme:

- Has not been placed in the function of a professor or in an associate professor's position in the relevant or related field of study at the higher education level where he/she is responsible for the quality and development of the study programme,
- Did not achieve the required level of results of research/publication activities,
- Has not achieved the required professional competence for the profession for which graduates of the study programme are prepared,
- Worked in a field other than the relevant or related field of study in which the study programme takes place,
- Worked as a senior staff member for a university abroad.

In the other two cases, the higher education institution submitted a report to the Ministry of Education due to the time limit of the competence of the implementation of the study programme due to the criterion of KSP-A6 (lacklustre representation of publication outputs recorded in databases with the guarantor and co-guarantor, low number of projects with the guarantor obtained for research funding). The Agency found that the above criterion had not been met on the basis that the guarantor did not show publication activity in the field of study accepted at international level and thus did not meet the requirements according to which the guarantor of the study programme has a scientific or artistic profile

²³ According to the requirements in force until 30 October 2018, the university was only able to be granted the competence to carry out study programmes until the end of the academic year in which the guarantor of the study programme reached the age of 70 years.

that guarantee professional quality in guaranteeing the study programme and its publication and research activity in the previous five years helps development of the study programme.

Verification of the results of the elimination of deficiencies in relation to the conduct of the habilitation and inaugural proceeding

In 2020-2021, the Agency reviewed 35 reports concerning the elimination of deficiencies in relation to the implementation of the habilitation and inaugural proceeding. In verifying the results of the adopted measures of higher education institutions in relation to the conduct of habilitation and inaugural proceedings, the Agency used criteria for assessing the competence of higher education institutions to conduct habilitation and inaugural proceedings.

The reason for reporting higher education institutions in relation to the implementation of habilitation proceedings and inaugural proceedings was in 34 cases non-compliance with the criterion **KHKV-A5** *Guaranteeing the quality of the implementation of habilitation proceeding and proceeding for the appointment of professors (level of guarantors and co-guarantors of habilitation proceeding and proceeding for the appointment of professors)* and in 1 case non-compliance with the criterion **KHKV A1** *Accredited study programme in the field of study, in which the higher education institution applies for accreditation.*

After verifying the outcome of the adopted measures of higher education institutions in relation to the implementation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings of HEIs, the Agency found 28 cases that the HEI, after the adoption of the measures, met the relevant criteria for accreditation, and subsequently marked the abolition of the time limit in the register of study fields. In 6 cases, it found that the HEI did not meet the relevant accreditation criteria after the adoption of the measures and subsequently with the relevant right to conduct habilitation and inaugural proceedings in the relevant field of habilitation and inaugural proceedings.

The reason for the withdrawal of the right to conduct habilitation and inaugural proceedings of the higher education institution was in all cases the non-fulfilment of the criterion KHKV-A5. On a case-by-case basis, any of the requirements or a combination of requirements of this criterion were not met because the guarantor (co-guarantor):

- Did not achieve the required level of results of creative activity (3 cases),
- Was not a university teacher in the function of a professor in the relevant field of study or in a related field of study and at the same time a full professor of higher education institution (2 cases),
- Worked in a field other than the relevant or related field of habilitation and inaugural proceedings (1 case),
- Did not achieve the required level of leadership of scientific projects and the education of doctoral students and was under-involved in foreign professional conferences and events (1 case).

Review panels

For the purpose of verifying the measures taken by HEIs, assessing proposals for the adaptation of study programmes and specific requests from HEIs, the Executive Board set up review panels from persons from the list of reviewers. A total of 383 reviewers were involved in these activities of the Agency in 2020 and 2021. Of this total number:

- 212 reviewers participated in one assessment,
- 77 reviewers worked in two review panels,
- 43 reviewers worked in three review panels,
- 24 reviewers cooperated within four review panels and
- 27 reviewers in five or more review panels.

260 reviewers were involved in the assessment of applications for accreditation of new study programmes.

6.3. Procedures for granting accreditation of new study programmes

The Act on Quality Assurance allowed higher education institutions to submit application to the Agency for accreditation of new study programmes in accordance with the procedure under § 30 of the Act until the end of March 2021, even if they are already active in the field and level of higher education in question. Out of the total number of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic (33), 16 higher education institutions took advantage of this possibility and applied to the Agency for accreditation of the study programme in accordance with the above-mentioned provision of the Act on Quality Assurance of 16 higher education institutions, which submitted 177 applications and 2 higher education institutions submitted an application for accreditation of new combination study programmes. In total, the applications concerned 24 fields of study. Most applications were submitted in the field of economics and management (26 applications), teaching and pedagogical sciences (25 application), arts (19 applications), Earth sciences(13 applications) and general medicine (12 applications).

Applications for accreditation of new study programmes were submitted by higher education institutions at all three levels of higher education. The most applications were submitted at level 3 of higher education (81 applications), 50 applications were submitted at level 1, 46 applications were submitted at level 2 and 2 applications were submitted in the united 1st and 2nd level of higher education. Furthermore, higher education institutions submitted 6 applications for accreditation of professionally oriented bachelor study programmes in the 1st level of higher education. In terms of the form of stud programmes, 121 applications were submitted to the Agency with a view to their full-time study and 58 in part-time form. 18 applications for accreditation of study programmes aimed at the performance of regulated professions in the Slovak Republic were sent to the Agency.

A total of 109 applications were submitted for accreditation of the study programme, in which the language of implementation was to be the Slovak language, in 36 study programmes the language of implementation was to be the Slovak language and English language combined, and in 29 applications higher education institutions applied to the Agency for accreditation of the study programme in English language. For other applications, the programmes were to be implemented in Hungarian (2) and further than following languages: French, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Italian, Spanish (2), Dutch, German and Swedish (2).

As of November 30, 2021 the Agency decided on 138 applications from higher education institutions. In 125 cases, the Agency decided to grant accreditation of a new study programme and in 15 cases the Agency decided to reject the application of the higher education institution or not to grant accreditation of the study programme on the grounds

that the study programme did not meet the standards for the study programme. Higher education institutions that have applied for accreditation of a new study programme pursuant to § 30 of the Act on Quality Assurance are as follows: University of Economics in Bratislava, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, Academy of Economics and Management of Public Administration in Bratislava, J.Selye University in Komárno, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Trnava University in Trnava, University of St. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy in Košice and Prešov University in Prešov

Application for accreditation of the joint study programme

In 2021, 1 application was submitted to the agency for accreditation of the joint study programme of the Higher Education Institution in Slovakia, which is to be carried out in cooperation with several higher education institutions accredited by the relevant institutions abroad. This request shall be the subject of a review by the Agency.

6.4. Objections raised

In the framework of the agency's proceedings, a party to proceedings (higher education institution) pursuant to § 8 para. 4 of the Quality Assurance Act has the possibility to lodge a reasoned objection of bias against a member of the review panel. This possibility was used by higher education institutions in 6 proceedings. The objections lodged pursuant to the above provision of the Quality Assurance Act were subsequently decided by the Executive Board. In two proceedings, the Executive Board assessed the objections of bias against a member of the review panel as well founded. In the other 5 proceedings, the Executive Board assessed the bias objections raised against the member of the review panel as unfounded.

Pursuant to § 22 para. 1 of the Quality Assurance Act, a party to proceedings has the right to object to a decision or to a statement of the Agency within 15 working days of the date on which the decision or statement was delivered to the party. The possibility of objecting to the agency's decision has been used by higher education institutions in 3 proceedings of the Agency so far. The objections submitted by a party shall be decided by the Commission of the agency for the Assessment of Objections in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Quality Assurance Act.

6.5. Other proceedings and decisions of the Agency

Proposals for modification of study programmes of higher education institutions

Pursuant to § 35 para. 7 of the Quality Assurance Act, if the Minister of Education, after prior notification of the Accreditation Commission on the outcome of the adopted measures of the higher education institution to remedy deficiencies in relation to the implementation of study programmes, decided to grant the right with a time limit, to renew the right with a time limit or to suspend the granted right to conduct the relevant study programme, the higher education institution was obliged under the transitional provisions

of the Act on Quality Assurance submit to the Agency a proposal for modification of the study programme or notification of its cancellation.

If the result of the measures taken pursuant to the transitional provisions of the Act on Quality Assurance was verified by the Agency and found that the higher education institution did not meet the relevant accreditation criteria after the adoption of the measures, the Agency subsequently suspended the implementation of the study programme pursuant to §27 of the Quality assurance act. On the basis of such a decision of the Agency, higher education institutions were obliged, pursuant to §27 para. 4 of Quality Assurance Act, to notify the Agency of the cancellation of the relevant study programme or to submit a draft modification of the study programme within a specified period. In the event that the higher education institution submits a draft modification of the study programme to the Agency within a specified period of time, the Agency reviews this change already according to the standards for the study programme and evaluates whether or not the proposed change creates a prerequisite for meeting the standards for the study programme

The Agency shall give its consent to the proposed modification of the study programme if the proposed amendment creates a prerequisite for meeting the standards for the study programme. The higher education institution will then modify the study programme at the latest from the next academic year, informs the Agency about it without delay and the Agency verifies this fact in the register of study programmes within 30 days of the notification of the higher education institution.

In 2020 and 2021, a total of 21 draft modifications of study programmes were submitted to the Agency pursuant to §35 para. 7 of the Quality Assurance Act. By 15 December 2021, the Agency had given 16 approvals to the draft modifications submitted. In four cases, the Agency stated that the submitted proposal for modification of the study programme of the higher education institution does not create a prerequisite for meeting the standards for the study programme, and by decision asked the higher education institution to submit a new draft modification of the study programme within 180 days. In all four cases, higher education institutions have submitted a new proposal to modify the study programme within the prescribed period and these proposals are currently being considered by review panels. In the case of one draft amendment and four, in the order of the second proposals for the modification of the study programmes of the higher education institution, the assessment is currently under way.

The Agency's decisions that the draft adjustment does not create a precondition for meeting the standards for the study programme were based on the following reasons:

The results of the creative activity of the proposed teachers providing profile subjects do not correspond to the significant international level envisaged by the standards

- for the study programme (in 3 cases),
- The proposed providing teachers are qualified in a field of study other than that of the study programme under consideration (in 2 cases);
- The workload of the proposed person responsible for the study programme did not create a prerequisite for not holding responsibility for the implementation, development and quality assurance of the study programme and achieving the required learning outcomes of the study programme (in 3 cases);
- One of the proposed teachers providing study programme profile subjects did not actually provide a single profile subject in the study programme under consideration

(in 2 cases);

- Insufficient control of the Slovak language by the person who has the relevant competences and bears the main responsibility for the implementation, development and quality assurance of the study programme, with regard to the proper functioning of the study programme carried out in the full-time form of study in the Slovak language (in one case).

Under the transitional provisions of the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency may initiate proceedings on its own initiative at the time of submission of information by the higher education institution that it has brought the internal system into line with the standards for the internal system if it has reasonable grounds to suspect that the HEI is not complying with the legislation or its internal regulations. On the basis of § 35 para. 14 of the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency initiated 8 procedures. In one of the proceedings, the Agency identified deficiencies and initiated proceedings for withdrawal of accreditation of habilitation and inaugural proceedings in the relevant field of habilitation and inaugural proceedings of the HEI.

Requests for prior consent to the modification of a new study programme

If the higher education institution is not entitled to modify the relevant study programme and intends to modify it, it is obliged to ask the Agency to give its consent to its modification within the meaning of § 30 para.9 of the Quality Assurance Act:

In the application for prior consent, the HEI briefly indicates the characteristics of the modification of the study programme within the meaning of § 2 (g) of the Quality Assurance Act:

- Addition or deletion of compulsory or compulsory optional subjects,
- A change in the conditions for the proper termination of the study or
- Modification of the information sheet of the compulsory subject or compulsory optional subject and the expected impact of the modification of the study programme on the fulfilment of related standards for the study programme.

Higher education institutions submitted 145 applications to the Agency this year for prior approval to modify the study programme. Upon prior approval by the Agency, higher education institutions may make adjustments to the relevant study programme. However, granting the Agency's approval does not also mean confirming the compliance of these study programmes with the standards for the study programme. With reference to the relevant provisions of the Act on Quality Assurance and Standards for the Study Programme, the higher education institution is obliged to align the implemented study programme with the standards for the study programme by 1 September 2022.

7. CHANGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NUMBER OF REGISTERED STUDY PROGRAMMES

Quantity is one of the basic measurable indicators. In higher education, these can be the numbers of students or graduates; however, these are mainly influenced by the demographics of the country, which is not the subject of this report. From the point of view of quantitative monitoring of changes in the behaviour of higher education institutions, it is preferable to monitor the number of study programmes and their structure, since these directly characterize the product offer of higher education institutions.

The basic idea of a new way of ensuring the quality of higher education is to transfer the responsibilities for its quality to its provider, i.e. to higher education institutions. Part of this process is not only the harmonization of internal regulations of higher education institutions with the standards for the internal system, but also the harmonization of all study programmes with the requirements of standards for the study programme directly at higher education institutions. Higher education institutions have thus started not only to create and adopt new regulations, but also to bring together and modify existing study programmes, replace them with new ones or prepare completely new ones. Those study programmes that are not prospective or are not possible to modify for all sorts of reasons are cancelled by higher education institutions.

According to the law, higher education institutions must harmonize all study programmes by 1 September 2022. Therefore, it is presumed that at this date only revised study programmes meeting the new requirements of the standards will be offered by higher education institutions.

At the heart of quality assurance is the process of evaluating and revising the offered study programmes at the HEIs themselves in order to ensure that they meet the requirements of the standards. By issuing standards in a given legislative framework, the Accreditation Agency has set professional requirements in accordance with ESG and will help to increase the efficiency of internal quality systems in individual higher education institutions through external quality assurance.

Although the functionality of the implemented quality assurance systems of individual higher education institutions is yet to be comprehensively verified by reviewing the compliance of internal systems with standards, implementation of the requirements of quality standards for study programmes is already taking place at higher education institutions.

One of the overall indicators of changes in the offer of study programmes of Slovak higher education institutions may be the development of their number. Therefore, we will monitor the number of registered study programmes in the register of the Ministry of Education.

7.1. Registers of study programmes

The registers of the Ministry of Education, in particular the Register of Study Programmes and the Register of Study Fields, have become legally relevant registers for the field of higher education rights with the adoption of the Act on Quality Assurance and the

related amendment to the Act on Higher Education Institutions in 2018.

For this reason, changes are being made to the design of registers so that these tasks resulting from the legislation can also be technically fulfilled. These technical changes include the extension of the details entered in the registers, as well as the authorization of higher education institutions to write some of this data directly. This is why it will be important for registers to contain real information on study programmes.

In total, 6,428 study programmes are registered in the register of study programmes as of 9 December 2021, of which 5 784 are „standard“, 540 teachers and 104 translation programmes. New records are continuously added to the register, so these data may slightly change.

As of the date of entry into force of the standards, i.e. on 1 September 2020, 7 359 study programmes were registered in the register. This is the most since the beginning of the operation of the register. Of this number, 1 573 were registered as suspended, which is 21%. By comparison, only 6% of all registered study programmes were suspended in 2016.

A relatively large group of suspended study programmes, which were created in connection with previous comprehensive accreditation, are registered in the register. If higher education institutions wanted to significantly modify the study programme or change the name, they had to apply for accreditation of a new study programme. Programmes for which re-accreditation has not been requested have been suspended by the termination of comprehensive accreditation. These could be studied by students, but the college could no longer recruit new students for them.

Before 2020, a slow increase in the total number of study programmes can be observed – by about 10% from 1 January 2016. From 1 January 2020 on the other hand, they are declining at a relatively rapid pace.

The structure is also interesting in the decline of the last period. As of 9 December 2021, the number of non-suspended study programmes decreased by 301, which is a decrease of 5.2% and suspended 630, representing 40.1% of the numbers as of 1 September 2020. A total of 931 study programmes were cancelled during this period.

We believe that this is partly due to the fact that since the adoption of the Quality Assurance Act, higher education institutions have not been able to apply for accreditation of an individual study programme as in the previous period, except for the procedure under § 30. However, this was only real after the publication of accreditation standards.

We assume that the decrease in suspended study programmes is also related to the administrative „cleaning“ of the register from the registration of completed programmes after previous comprehensive accreditation.

However, more than 300 cancelled non-suspended programmes demonstrate a further dynamics of life in higher education institutions, which may be related to the change of accreditation rules and to the revision of study programmes when they are brought into line with standards and follow up with preparation for accreditation of the internal system. This process is due to be complete by 1 September 2022 at the latest. It can be assumed that the next set of programmes will be cancelled in the summer of next year.

7.2. Structure of registered study programmes

In this section, we provide overviews of changes in the number of study programmes at higher education institutions in recent years. All information regarding the number of the

study programmes was drawn from the Register of Study Programmes.²⁴, which can be found on the PortálVS.sk. The HEIs Portal was created on the proposal of the EUNIS-SK association and with the support of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic within the framework of central development projects.

The main objective of the portal is to ensure the creation of systematically organized and professionally guaranteed information concerning higher education institutions, to create space for the exchange of experience and to provide information on conferences, seminars and educational products. The register allows monitoring of the development of study programmes according to several criteria – filters. The data that was displayed when entering individual characteristics (=filters) were considered relevant.

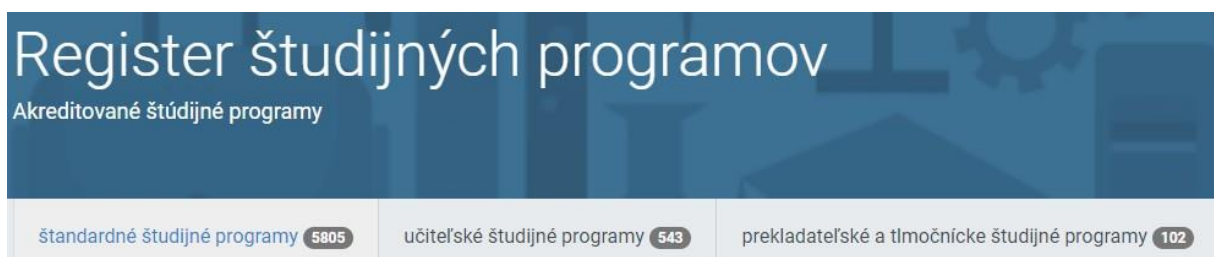


Figure 1. Register of study programmes

According to the Act on Higher Education Institutions, higher education institutions provide, organize and secure higher education within accredited study programmes. The scope of the privileges for their creation, modification and implementation is stated in the register of study fields administered by the Ministry. Higher education in the field of study or in a combination of two fields of study is obtained by study according to an accredited study programmes in this field of study or in a combination of two fields of study.

The above-mentioned register divides study programmes into three categories: standard study programmes, teacher study programmes and translation and interpreting study programmes. Each group has its own bookmark in the register.

According to the Act on Higher Education, the teacher combination programme is a bachelor study programme or master study programme in the field of study, which has the word „teaching“ in its title, or in a combination of such fields of study, and covers two subjects. The translation combination study programme is carried out as a Bachelor study programme or master study programme in the field of translation and interpreting and covers two languages.

Approximately 90% of study programmes fall into the category of standard study programmes. This proportion has changed only minimally over the last five years. Teacher combination study programmes were 8-9% and the remaining share is represented by translation and interpreting combination programmes.

The development of the total number of study programmes is shown in Figure 2. By 2020, a gradual increase of around 10% in standard study programmes can be observed, but in 2020 it is a change in trend and a more pronounced decrease.

In the first part of the reporting period – from 1 September 2016 to 1 September 2018 – the number of standard study programmes changed only slightly. Between 1 September 2018 and 1 September 2020, it grew more strongly and (within the comparative

²⁴ <https://www.portalvs.sk/sk/morho>

dates) reached its peak (6 675 study programmes) in 2020.

The current period of the last year between 1 September 2020 and 24 November 2021 is characterized by a significant decrease in the number of standard study programmes.

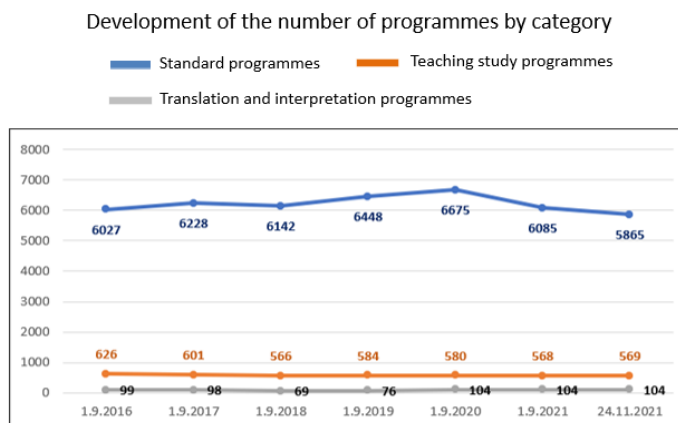


Figure 2. Development of the number of programmes by category

For teacher programmes, the dynamics of the number of programmes are significantly different from standard programmes. Since 1 September 2016, the downward trend has prevailed. On the other hand, the number of translation and interpreting study programmes has been at its highest level since 1 September 2020.

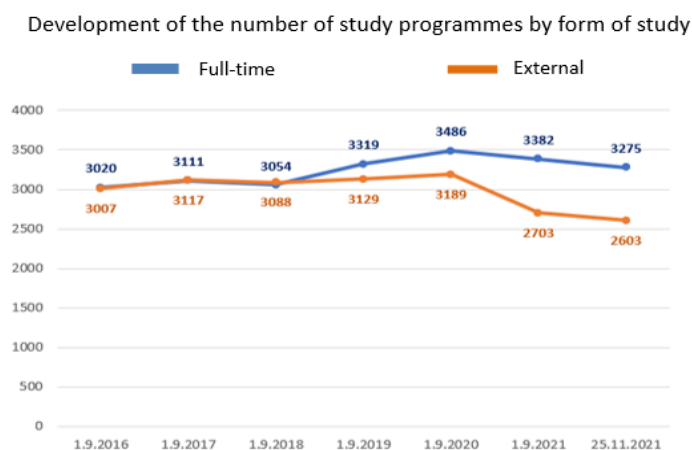


Figure 3. Development of the number of study programmes by form of study

An interesting view is the development of the number of registered standard study programmes depending on the form of study. The decrease in recent years mainly concerned the external form of study.

In terms of comparing the different levels of higher education, the overall development of the number of study programmes at all levels of higher education is similar. However, it is more pronounced at the first and second levels, less at the third - doctoral level of study.

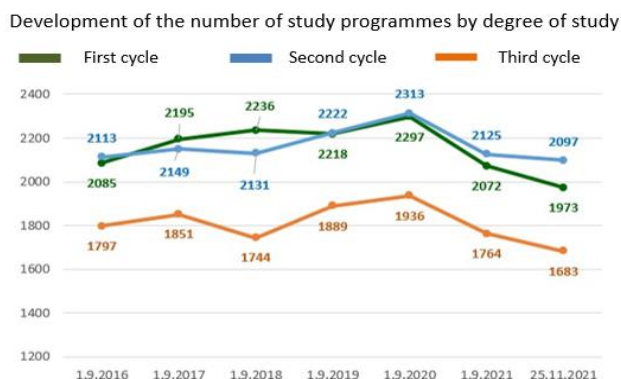


Figure 4. Development of the number of study programmes by degree of study, 1.,2. and 3. cycle

There are significant differences in the development of the number of study programmes between private and public higher education institutions.

Compared to public higher education institutions, private higher education institutions recorded:

- A more dynamic percentage increase in the number of study programmes between 1 September 2016 and 1 September 2020;
- A more modest percentage decrease in study programmes between 1 September 2020 and 25 November 2021 (Image 5).

In the above analysis, suspended programmes were also including the total number of study programmes. State higher education institutions do not feature in the second graph due to their minimal fluctuations in the number of study programmes (including suspended programmes).

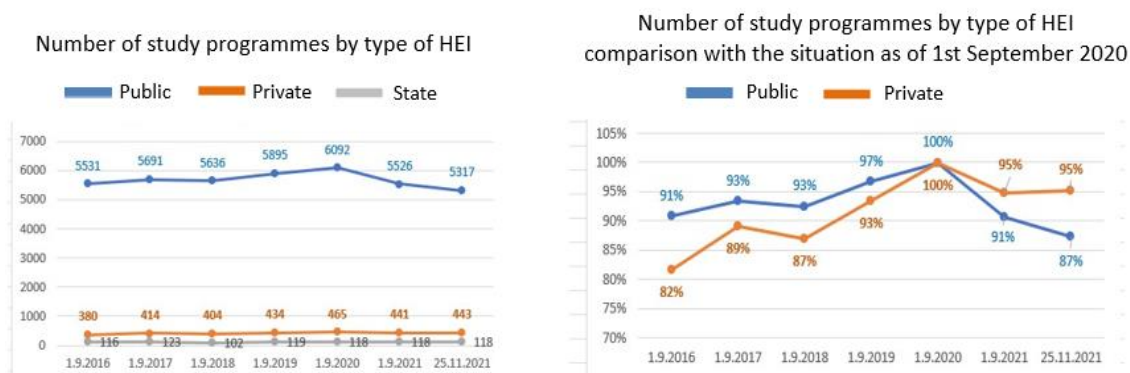


Figure 5. Number of study programmes (including suspended) by type of higher education institution and their comparison with the situation as of 1 September 2020.

Another look compares the total number of study programmes with the inclusion of suspended programmes and without suspended programmes. The results indicate that between 1 September 2020 and 1 September 2021, public higher education institutions (as opposed to private ones) significantly reduced not only the total number of their study programmes, but also the share of suspended study programmes in their total number, from 20% to 14%. This would indicate that public higher education institutions are responding more quickly to the need to formally cancel suspended study programmes.

Share of suspended study programmes in the total number of study programmes – by type of higher education institution

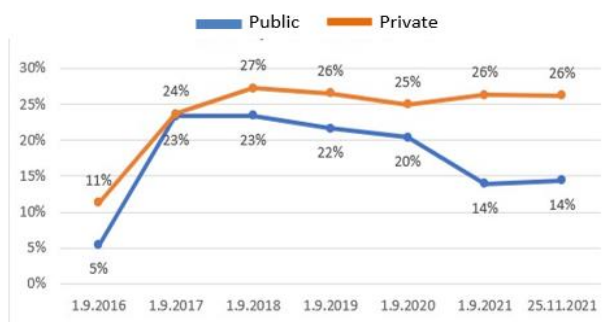


Figure 6. Share of suspended study programmes in the total number of study programmes – by type of higher education institutions

8. STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY – ACADEMIC QUARTER

8.1. Basic information about the survey

One of the main pillars of the new accreditation is feedback from stakeholders, its effective use in favour of improving the quality of higher education institutions and in favour of informed data-based decisions. Responding to this need using examples of good practice from advanced education systems from abroad, the Agency decided to carry out a unique survey. In May 2021, it collected data as part of the Academic Quarter survey, which the agency began preparing as early as 2020. The survey focused on systematic mapping of student satisfaction in Slovakia with their study and student life. The target group – in 2021 – were students of universities of the first (bachelor's) and second (master's/engineering) degrees and associated studies (e.g. pharmacy, medicine). Students were approached as a priority via school e-mails, which were entered in the Central Student Register. In this way, up to 99% of students out of a total 126 798 students were approached. The survey collected a total of 20 056 questionnaire replies, of which 19 983 were valid, which means that valid responses were from 16% of the student population, which is a significant result for the survey. The survey is representative at the level of type of HEI (public, state, private), forms of study (full-time, external), level (1st, 2nd and associated study), sex of respondents, faculty and fields of study. The sample also showed a significant proportion of foreign students (1 419) and students with specific needs (1 024), allowing the needs of these important and often overlooked groups of students to be investigated. The questionnaire was in four language mutations – Slovak, Hungarian, English and Ukrainian . and also in a form accessible to students with visual disadvantage.

The high completion of the questionnaire was achieved thanks to a conceptual communication campaign for the whole projects and a good cooperation with higher education institutions that helped promote the questionnaire. The communication also used SAAHE accounts on social networks and involved various student organizations and student representatives. The survey also helped to promote important personalities – the president of the Slovak Republic Zuzana Čaputová, the Minister of Education of the Slovak Republic Branislav Grohling, scientist Pavol Čekan, Samuel Kováčik „Vedator“, or Veronika Ostrihoňová. Crucially, the analytical team regularly assessed the degree of fill-in of the questionnaire according to quota characteristics and contacted specific schools and workplaces where representation was still lacking as appropriate. It also sent four reminders to students who did not complete the questionnaire, which significantly increased returns.

Despite the sophisticated linking of the survey to student school e-mail addresses, the priority of the project was to ensure the anonymity of the survey. More about the methodology can be found [HERE](#).

8.2. Communication of outputs to universities and students

Higher education institutions have been told from the outset that they will get results at university level first before the results are provided to the public. For this reason, on 25 October 2021, a webinar was carried out for all higher education institutions, where they were explained how to work with the data. Universities got their data on the same day, two hours before the webinar.

At the same time, respondents were able to comment on whether they wanted information from the questionnaire outputs, 81% of whom chose this option. These students were sent a press release from the first press conference on the survey outputs, as well as press release issued on the occasion of the publication of an interactive application containing part of the questionnaire outputs, so that they know where to find more comprehensive survey outputs. Both are described in more detail in the following section.

From the provision of results to higher education institutions to the beginning of December, when this report is being processed, a number of cases have been recorded where higher education institutions have used survey data in their public and internal communication. Thus it can be seen as a positive fact because it shows that universities take research and its results seriously and care about students' opinions.

8.3. Communication of outputs to the general public

Partial results of the survey were communicated through two press conferences and four press releases. The first press conference took place on 29 June 2021. In addition to basic information about the survey, data on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the quality of their studies, students' readiness for the labour market, as well as the overall satisfaction of students with their studies were also presented. One of the interesting and positive findings shows the following graph, which states that most students would recommend their study programme to their friends and acquaintances:

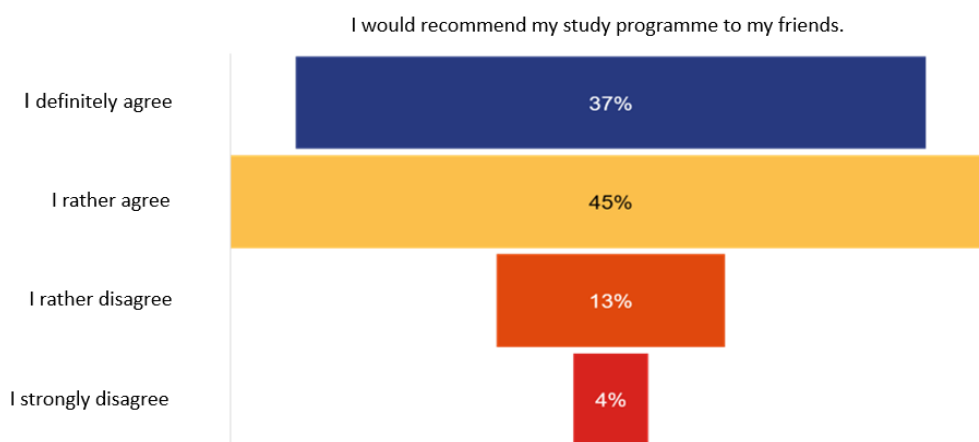


Figure 7. All responses (SAAHE, 2021, n = 19983), consent rate (1 – 4)

The full press release and recording of the first press conference are available [HERE](#). At the second press conference, an interactive application with survey results and information on two topics from the survey was presented. The first topic was the link between violations of

academic ethics and what teaching methods teachers use. The second was how it relates to whether students develop their potential, and if they feel ready for life after university. In both cases, these are closely interlinked aspects. For the record, the graph below shows the second of the respective relationships. The full press release is available [HERE](#). The press conference took place on 26 October 2021.

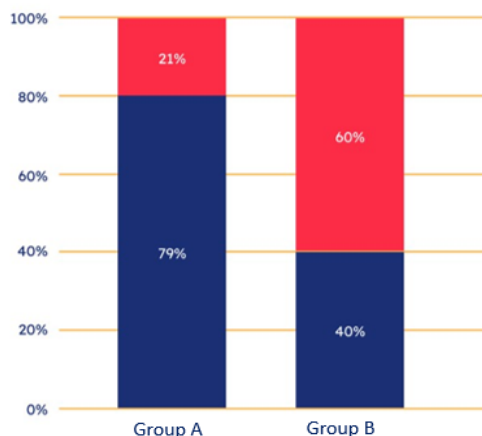
Thanks to my studies so far, I feel ready for life after university

Both groups (A and B) consist of graduates of 1st and 2nd degree/combined study, who planned to end the academic year by obtaining a degree. They differ in their perception of helping teachers develop their potential.

Group A: its members declared that most of their teachers help them fulfill their potential. Na = 3 214

Group B: its members declared that a minority of their teachers help them fulfill their potential. Na = 2 728

■ Strongly agree + rather agree ■ Strongly disagree + rather disagree



As mentioned above, an interactive application (dashboard on the PowerBIplatform) was also introduced at the second press conference. It is a tool that delivers the results of the survey in graphical form. It is publicly available and was programmed by Go4Insight, which also carried out field data collection. The content of the dashboard was defined by the SAAHE analysis team and contains those issues that appeared to be the most relevant from the point of view of applicants, students and general public. It does not contain answers to all the questions in the survey, but nevertheless has a wide range. The dashboard user has the option to select filters. Through them, we can get to know the opinions of students in a particular field, form, level of study, faculty and university. Dashboard also offers 5 filters according to significant questions. Significant questions included such questions, the answers of which are strongly intertwined with the answers to most other questions in the questionnaire. The following questions have been included in the filter of significant questions. *I feel being part of my school's student and teacher community; The school has taken into account my comments and suggestions; Teachers help me fulfill my potential; Teachers treat students condescendingly; professors teach using methods to understand the curriculum.*

Dashboard is divided into 10 sections according to different aspects of the study. For each chart, there is information about the pattern and scale. In the case of indices, it is indicated of which questions they are composed of. This information must be taken into account when interpreting data from the dashboard. Each graph also provides a national benchmark (a value calculated for the entire sample) against which the result can be compared according to the selected filter. If the user is only interested in a nationwide view, they can reset the filter group at the same time or do not enter them at all.

Dashboard as well as instructions for its use are available on the project output website [HERE](#).

Another press release was prepared in connection with the beginning of the

academic year and dealt with the topic of adapting students of the first year of study to the higher education environment as a matter of priority. The press release was published on 24 September 2021 and is available [HERE](#). The fourth press release responded to the current pandemic situation: it addressed how online education, which is introduced as result of the Covid-19 pandemic, threatens the quality of education and also creates space for more frequent violations of academic ethics and how to change this. The press release was released on 11 November 2021 and is available [HERE](#).

Overall, the media slowly get used to the outputs of the questionnaire and regularly contact the analytical team about the data in order to comment on some aspect of higher education in Slovakia through them.

8.4. Communication of results to government institutions

The success of the Agency's project is due to the fact that the results of the survey are of the interest of the state's top officials. The Agency was invited to meet the President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová, where the results of the survey and other project plans were communicated. The meeting took place on 9 July 2021 and the President was most interested in data on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students, data on the needs of students with specific needs and how these needs are met.

Information and press releases are also regularly sent to the Minister of Education Branislav Grohling and his Secretary of State responsible for higher education, Ľudovít Paulis. Information about the interactive application was also communicated to the Commission of the Ministry of Education preparing the long-term intention of higher education institutions and the Strategic Council of the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic.

8.5. International success of the project

The Academic Quarter of an Hour survey also impressed the organizers of the prestigious EQAF 2021 European Conference. The analysis team had the opportunity to present the survey as part of the agenda of the conference on 18 November 2021 in front of more than a hundred experts from all over the European education area, thus bringing in valuable experience into professional discourse.

8.6. Communication of survey results to Agency review panels

The next stage is the planned preparation of a special application that will simplify data work for review panels and wider use of data for further analysis. For the needs of the review panels, the application will link the outputs of the questionnaire to the specific criteria that will be used in reviewing the internal quality system of HEI. The task of the application is to signal interesting survey conclusions to review panels in order to show in a simple and transparent manner on, which aspects, from the point of view of students, should the review panel focus on during the review process. The application will make it easy to work with data even for agency employees while supervising compliance with standards. However, it will always be an indication that assessors or employees will also have to examine other background and data including

interviews during on-site review. The ambition of the project is to extend the data collection to doctoral students and, in case of sufficient capacities, to teachers and other stakeholders, to repeat the collection in order to track trends, as well as to link the data with findings of reviewers and experts. The aim is to improve the quality of higher education institutions and also to improve the agency's methodological guidelines.

9. CONCLUSION

The changes to higher education legislation adopted at the end of 2018 highlighted the need to apply higher quality to higher education and set the legislative framework for the gradual implementation of its provision and periodic evaluation. An accreditation agency has been set up as an independent organization with a set of effective legal powers in the field of accreditation process and quality assurance of higher education institutions. The agency, in cooperation with experts and stakeholders, has developed and issued accreditation standards and a methodology for their evaluation in accordance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*.

During the last years 2019-2021, not only were the first ESG-compliant processes prepared, but they also became gradually applied. Within the prescribed period, the Agency took over the agenda of the Accreditation Commission, an advisory body of the government, which ceased its activities on 31 December 2019. The Agency carried out 299 procedures for review the results of the measures to eliminate deficiencies imposed by the Accreditation Commission on certain higher education institutions and made an appropriate decision. In 2021, the Agency also started the first procedures based on requests for accreditation of 177 new study programmes according to new accreditation standards.

In addition to the agency's direct activities, such as individual proceedings, separate activities of higher education institutions were also recorded. The internal regulations of HEIs with the standards for the internal system, the harmonization of study programmes with the requirements of standards or the revision of their number and assortment began to take place. This process must be completed by higher education institutions by 1 September 2022. At the time of compilation of this report, half of the higher education institutions in Slovakia have adopted and published internal regulations implementing the new requirements of the Act on Quality assurance and Accreditation Standards. 16 higher education institutions have applied for accreditation of new study programmes.

Since the entry into force of standards in the register of study programmes operated by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, almost 1 000 study programmes have been cancelled. It can be substantiated that higher education institutions not only regulate study programmes in connection with compliance with standards, but also cancel non-perspective and suspended study programmes.

The process of implementing quality assurance systems is not complete. However, it is clear from the above information that the process of changes in higher education of the Slovak Republic has begun and has a real chance to bring the quality of Slovak higher education closer to European standards.

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The report is published on the website of the SAAHE www.saavs.sk

