

Action plan  
for the external review  
of Slovak Accreditation Agency  
for Higher Education



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## 1. Introduction

The action plan was one of the deliverables of the international project *Supporting Countries and their Agencies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Meeting the ESG 2015* (Supporting European QA Agencies in Meeting the ESG - SEQA-ESG). The project aims to support national quality assurance agencies for higher education and representatives of state institutions as framers of national policies in creating a quality assurance system for higher education in accordance with the ESG 2015 (The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area, hereinafter the “ESG 2015”).

The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as the “Ministry”) and the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as “SAAHE” or the “Agency”) both participated in the creation of the action plan. The objectives set out herein were based on the conclusions of the meeting with experts from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), discussions with stakeholders, and on comparisons of practices and experience of other countries.

The National peer counselling visit with the above-mentioned experts took place online on 25<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> November 2020, with the participation of representatives of the invited stakeholders. The Slovak Rectors’ Conference, the Higher Education Council, and the Student Council of Higher Education were delegated among the invitees. Representatives of employers from the Federation of Employer Associations of the Slovak Republic, the National Union of Employers, and the Alliance of Sectoral Councils were also present.

The preparation of the action plan began in December 2020 following the conclusions from the meeting with ENQA and EQAR experts. The action plan was discussed with representatives of the relevant stakeholders, in particular official representative organizations of higher education institutions as well as employers. The main aim of the action plan was to establish the objectives and steps within the ongoing transformation of the quality assurance system. Its task was to identify the most problematic areas and present measurable indicators (desired outcomes) that would ensure a functional and effective system of external quality assurance of higher education at the national level. In 2022 the Agency initiated the activities that would lead to ENQA membership and EQAR registration. Therefore, new action lines were added to the action plan to achieve this objective.

## 2. History and profile of the agency

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education, as an independent legal body, was established by Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education and amendment of Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and amendment of certain acts, as amended (Quality Assurance Act). It was a significant milestone in the system of quality assurance of higher education in Slovakia. The main objective of this legal change in Slovakia was the adoption of quality assurance framework in higher education, fully consistent with the European principles governing this area in Europe. Formerly, this legal scope was regulated directly within the Higher Education Act itself and the accreditation applications were reviewed by the Accreditation Commission, which was an advisory body to the government of the Slovak Republic. The obvious deficiency of this system consisted of the risk of political influence and lack of transparency.

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Based on the change introduced by Quality Assurance Act, SAAHE is furnished with all necessary competencies in the field of quality assessment of higher education institutions. The decisions of SAAHE in the field of external quality assessment of higher education institutions in Slovakia are independent and final and are not limited by any external bodies. The variety of SAAHE decisions cover the assessment of the internal quality assurance system of a higher education institution, the accreditation of study programmes, and the accreditation of habilitation and inauguration proceedings.

The basic structure of SAAHE is determined by the Quality Assurance Act by establishing its bodies and defining their rights, duties, and basic links. The supreme decision-making body is the Executive Board which has nine members. The Quality Assurance Act also establishes the Board of Appeal with five members, the Head of Office, and the internal Auditor. Procedures of nomination and appointment of each member of the mentioned bodies is stipulated in the Quality Assurance Act.

The initial years of SAAHE were dedicated to the issuance of Standards for Internal Quality Assurance System of Higher Education and the development of a functional internal system to successfully carry out its mission. In 2020, the focus of SAAHE in the area of accreditation were verifications of the results of actions adopted by higher education institutions addressing deficiencies identified by the Accreditation Commission in its previous accreditation statements. Within this transitional period, the Ministry of Education forwarded to SAAHE up to 299 university reports from the previous accreditation period.

The first external quality assessment procedures of SAAHE, conducted following the accreditation standards, were launched in 2021. The Quality Assurance Act allowed higher education institutions to submit applications for accreditation of new study programmes. From the total number of higher education institutions Slovakia (33), up to sixteen of them submitted 177 applications. By the end of 2021, SAAHE successfully completed all these proceedings. Moreover, based on the Quality Assurance Act, SAAHE initiated eight own-initiative proceedings addressing identified deficiencies. In 2021, SAAHE also processed 145 applications of study programme modification.

According to the Quality Assurance Act, each higher education institution established in the Slovak Republic is obliged to have reviewed its internal system and its implementation for the first time by the end of 2022 at the latest. Compliance of the internal system with the standards, its functionality, and correct implementation means institutional accreditation of the higher education institution as such. Currently, SAAHE is prepared to carry out this duty.

### 3. Follow-up to the national action plan – Action lines

Summary of proposed action lines:

- explaining the principles of and strengthening internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions (HEIs)
- level of stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance at higher education institutions (HEIs)
- quality of experts' activities – reviewers of external quality assurance of higher education
- ensure effective performance of the Agency
- build confidence

1. *Explaining the principles of and strengthening internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions (HEIs)*

1	<b>Title</b>	Explain the principles of and strengthen internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions (HEIs)	
<b>Objectives</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provide explanations of the guidelines, interpretations of the standards, and technical support to HEIs in the application process</li> <li>• organize events to support HEIs in the process of compliance of their internal systems and in the modification of study programs</li> <li>• use the Agency's web section FAQ to provide interpretation of the standards</li> <li>• ensure uniform interpretation of the standards</li> <li>• provide financial support to HEIs meeting the requirements for the implementation of the internal quality system</li> </ul>	
<b>Specific tasks</b>		<b>Responsible(s)</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
1	professional enhancement activities for experts in higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic	SAAHE Redhammer, Matlovič, Džubáková, Zacharová	March 2021 – June 2022
2	holding a conference and another online event for experts from higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic	SAAHE Džubáková, Redhammer, Matlovič, Zacharová	March 2021 – June 2022
3	creating an interface on the Agency's website, publication of questions and answers, their continuous replenishment and updating	SAAHE Džubáková, Gewisslerová	March 2021 - ongoing
4	performing internal seminars or similar events	SAAHE	March 2021 - ongoing

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		Redhammer, Matlovič, Džubáková	
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>regular online meetings with HEIs representatives responsible for quality assurance - better understanding of standards and processes of QA assurance</li> <li>events (SQAF) organized to support HEIs in the process of compliance of their internal systems – better preparation of HEIs for accreditation processes</li> <li>web section FAQ regularly updated providing interpretation of the standards</li> </ul>		
<b>Risks</b>		<b>Mitigation actions</b>	
HEIs' ignorance of their duties within internal quality assurance system		raise HEIs' awareness, FAQ, online meetings	
different approaches to standards		ensuring ongoing communication flow between the Board, management of SAAHE and the staff; providing professional development of the staff	
<b>Effort</b>		<b>Impact</b>	
<b>Score</b>	Comments (optional)	<b>Score</b>	Comments (optional)
4		5	

### 2. Level of stakeholder involvement in quality assurance at higher education institutions

<b>2</b>	<b>Title</b>	Level of stakeholder involvement in quality assurance at higher education institutions	
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase the involvement of employers in HEIs' quality assurance systems</li> <li>increase the number of students involved in HEIs' quality assurance systems</li> <li>carry out student satisfaction survey</li> </ul>		
<b>Specific tasks</b>		<b>Responsible(s)</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
1	raising awareness of the quality assurance system among employers, workshops and seminars targeted at employers, regular communication with employers and employers' associations, organizing meetings between higher education institutions and employers for the exchange of experiences and discussion	Redhammer, Matlovič, Džubáková	March 2021 – June 2022
2	preparation of future student reviewers, training of student reviewers, raising awareness of the quality assurance system among students, communication with students, workshops for students	Department of Accreditations	March 2021 - ongoing
3	preparation, carrying out and evaluation of a broader systematic	SAAHE, Analytical Department	March 2021 – June 2022



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	survey of students' views on higher education		
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improvement of cooperation with different types of stakeholders and deeper involvement of stakeholders in IQA on HEIs</li> <li>• larger proportion of students, employers involved in HEIs' quality assurance</li> <li>• increasing the number of reviewers from the practice registered in the list of reviewers</li> <li>• involvement of students and employers in each review panel in accreditation processes</li> <li>• student satisfaction survey carried out with over 20 000 respondents</li> <li>• online meetings with new reviewers</li> </ul>		
<b>Risks</b>		<b>Mitigation actions</b>	
no interest from employers to take part in the QA processes		find motivation for the employers, specific meetings and trainings for them, more explanation of the importance of stakeholders' involvement in QA processes	
no interest from students to take part in the QA processes		specialized trainings for student reviewers	
<b>Effort</b>		<b>Impact</b>	
<b>Score</b>	Comments (optional)	<b>Score</b>	Comments (optional)
4		3	

### 3. Quality of experts' activities – reviewers of external quality assurance of higher education

<b>3</b>	<b>Title</b>	Quality of experts' activities – reviewers of external quality assurance of higher education	
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• optimize feedback on the activity of reviewers and propose measures to improve their activities</li> <li>• look for inspiration and experience in quality assurance abroad</li> <li>• improve the selection of reviewers for registration in the list of reviewers and the selection of reviewers for the review panel</li> <li>• improve the training of reviewers – optimize the instruction system</li> </ul>		
<b>Specific tasks</b>		<b>Responsible(s)</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
1	improving tools for providing feedback from reviewers and their activities, evaluating this feedback, and proposing measures – system of feedbacks from various groups of stakeholders included in the accreditation processes	Džubáková	2022

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2	exchanging experience and best practices in the area of external quality assurance	Redhammer, Matlovič, Džubáková, Zacharová	2022 - ongoing
3	active searching for suitable reviewers in the Slovak Republic and abroad, improving internal procedures	Department of Accreditations	ongoing
4	updating the training/instruction of reviewers with regard to various stakeholders represented in the list of reviewers	Department of Accreditations	2022 - ongoing
<b>Outcomes</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• database of feedbacks from various groups of stakeholders on the Agency's proceedings in 2021 for following improvements of processes and following enhancement of accreditation processes based on this feedback</li> <li>• proposal and implementation of measures based on this feedback</li> <li>• communication with quality assurance agencies abroad – within SEQA project, ENQA events and V4 Forum</li> <li>• registration of new reviewers in the list of reviewers from Slovakia and abroad</li> <li>• evaluation of feedback from the reviewers and their satisfaction from accreditation processes</li> <li>• preparation of new set of targeted training models for experts differentiated according to their role in the review panels</li> <li>• reviewers better prepared for accreditation processes</li> </ul>	
<b>Risks</b>		<b>Mitigation actions</b>	
no interest of stakeholders to take part in the feedback processes		various ways of obtaining feedback from different groups of stakeholders	
<b>Effort</b>		<b>Impact</b>	
<b>Score</b>	Comments (optional)	<b>Score</b>	Comments (optional)
4		4	

### 4. Ensuring the effective performance of the Agency

4	<b>Title</b>	Ensuring the effective performance of the Agency
<b>Objectives</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• strengthen the quality of the Agency's institutional capacity to ensure the proceedings and optimize the Agency's organizational structures</li> <li>• extend the Agency's information system</li> <li>• improve support from expert and analytical activities</li> <li>• systematize the Agency's internal quality assurance procedures</li> </ul>

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>prepare the Agency for full membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR</li> </ul>	
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline
1	ensuring the professional development of the Agency's staff, stabilizing the Agency's staff structure	Management of the Agency	ongoing
2	building a module supporting the evaluation of internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions	IT Department, Accreditation Department	2021- ongoing
3	preparation of analytical outputs in the context of quality assurance in higher education	Analytical Department	
4	implementation of the Agency's internal procedures for quality assurance of the Agency's activities	Džubáková	
5	carrying out a preliminary audit of the Agency's procedures and elaborating a proposal of measures following the results of this audit	Džubáková	2022
6	Preparation for the ENQA and EQAR review	SAAHE	2022 - ongoing
<b>Outcomes</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>professional growth plan of the Agency's staff and proposal of measures</li> <li>functional module of the information system</li> <li>more effective and transparent QA processes</li> <li>thematic analysis</li> <li>outputs of a pilot survey of student satisfaction</li> <li>updated internal regulations</li> <li>full compliance with ESG and enhancement of QA system</li> <li>SWOT analysis (staff)</li> <li>resolution of the Executive Board to develop the Agency's SAR</li> <li>ENQA Review request letter sent</li> <li>SWOT analysis (Executive Board members)</li> <li>SAR draft</li> </ul>	
Risks		Mitigation actions	
Not enough resources Complexity of the Information system for reviewers		Careful planning of resources Training/guidelines about information system for reviewers	
Effort		Impact	
Score	Comments (optional)	Score	Comments (optional)

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4		4	
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### 5. Building confidence

5	Title		Building Confidence	
<b>Objectives</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>transparent public information</li> <li>systematic information management and access to study programs</li> </ul>		
Specific tasks		Responsible(s)	Timeline	
1	development of institutional processes for publishing applications and decisions		IT Department, Department of Accreditation	2021
3	modification and extension of the functionality of the study programs and study fields register		Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic in cooperation with the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education	2022 – ongoing
<b>Outcomes</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HEIs applications, final reports of the review panels and decisions of the Board publicly available at the agency's website</li> <li>web interface traffic</li> <li>more effective and transparent QA processes</li> </ul>		
Risks		Mitigation actions		
Effort		Impact		
Score	Comments (optional)		Score	Comments (optional)
3			4	

## 4. Preparatory steps for the agency's self-assessment and SWOT

Since the Quality Assurance Act obliges SAAHE to apply for membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR in 2022, the Agency's steps leading to the external review started in the beginning of this year.

The decision to develop a self-assessment report of the external quality assessment of SAAHE was approved by the Executive Board on 3 February 2022. A resolution on the structure of the report

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and the composition of the working group was adopted as well. The self-assessment report of SAAHE should be based on the critical reflection of its more than three years of operation. The objectives of the report comprise the assessment of the Agency activities and the determination of challenges and areas of future improvement. Thus, the main content of the report should be an assessment of the fulfilment of each ESG standard, specifying its development, current status, and obviously the Agency's ambition for improvement. In the process of SAR development, input from a wider team was anticipated. One of the important inputs that should be taken into account is the SWOT analysis, both from the Agency staff and Executive Board members.

SWOT analysis is part of the strategic planning of SAAHE. It provides important additive information from the Agency's internal and external environment and is the basis for the development of the Agency's strategic development plan and is periodically reviewed in the annual internal system evaluation process. A SWOT analysis is carried out periodically in the process of self-evaluation of the Agency's internal system and is composed from Agency staff, Executive Board members' inputs, and in cooperation with other stakeholders. The collection and evaluation of staff views were conducted anonymously between January 19, 2022, and January 24, 2022. Fourteen members of agency staff participated. Employee statements were categorized into internal environment assessment categories (categories used to evaluate strengths and weaknesses) and external environment assessment categories (used to evaluate opportunities and threats). Based on the frequencies of opinions in each category, weights were determined indicating the importance of the respective category in compiling the final SWOT and defining the SAAHE goals from the employees' perspective. A separate category was the input from Executive Board members. The initiation of data collection in this category was agreed upon at the Executive Board meeting on May 19, 2022. This procedure was not anonymous and was easier to process due to lower variance in the individual inputs.

The integration of the results consisted of unifying the different sets and assigning weight and thus the importance to the overall result. In this case, the work was more complicated due to the higher subjectivity of the staff perspective than in the case of the collective of Executive Board members. The resulting opinions were subsequently edited for stylistic consistency and wording.

## 5. Calendar

As it has been already stated, the implementation of the plan begun at the beginning of 2022. On the meeting of the Executive board of SAAHE held on 3 February 2022 the decision to develop a self-assessment report of the external quality assessment of SAAHE was approved. A resolution on the structure of the report and the composition of the working group was adopted as well. From that time, SAAHE follows the subsequent time schedule:

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| - SWOT analysis (staff)   | January 2022      |
| - Resolution of the Executive Board to develop the Agency's SAR | February 2022     |
| - ENQA Review request letter sent                               | February 2022     |
| - SWOT analysis (Executive Board members)                       | May 2022          |
| - SAR draft   | July 2022         |
| - EQAR online application                                       | August 2022       |
| - SAR completed and approved                                    | September 2022    |
| - Submission of SAR   | mid. October 2022 |
| - ENQA site visit   | February 2023     |

## 6. Conclusions

The admission of SAAHE to ENQA and its EQAR registration is not only its legal obligation but an utmost goal of its management as well. Undoubtedly, the SEQA-ESG project has been an important aid to carry out this mission. It helped to clearly identify and determine the important areas to focus on and helped to tailor and improve the majority of SAAHE processes necessary for an elaborate external quality assurance system. Moreover, it allowed to exchange experiences from other countries and to focus on priority areas as well.

The actual action plan for the external review, being in process already, is the last step that would lead SAAHE to ENQA and EQAR membership. We are confident, that all staff activities with the help of the SEQA-ESG project will help to achieve this goal.