



Evaluation of the Internal System of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education for the year 2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (“SAAHE” or “the Agency”) carried out an annual evaluation of its own internal system in accordance with Article 8 of Internal Regulation No. 1/[2022 Internal quality assurance system of the Agency’s activities](#).

The submitted report contains an evaluation of the fulfillment of the mission, objectives and principles for the year 2023. It summarises the compliance with the Agency’s internal system policies and proposes measures for further improvement. In particular, the evaluation was based on the review of the state and performance of the processes linked to the individual policies of the internal system.

The report is also strongly supported by the [results of an external evaluation of the Agency](#) carried out by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The report also reflects changes in the internal and external environment and their impact on the fulfillment of the Agency's mission, strategy and objectives.

2. MISSION, VISION AND OBJECTIVES

2.1. Mission and Vision

The mission of the Agency is to contribute to the improvement of quality of higher education in the Slovak Republic through external quality assurance tools according to the ESG 2015 principles and in line with the expectations of the stakeholders involved in education. The Agency provides higher education institutions with a professional and independent view of the quality of education and strengthens the culture of quality. The Agency mainly decides on matters related to the granting of authorisations to higher education institutions upon their requests and also carries out other related tasks.

The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education is the national reference point in the field of higher education. It is recognised within the European Higher Education Area. Its activities contribute to improving the quality of higher education, thus meeting the expectations of stakeholders and the general public, thus strengthening the social status and praise and increasing the attractiveness of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic.

In 2023, it continued to pursue its mission and vision. In the area of the main activity, which is the external quality assurance of higher education within the meaning of the Act, the Agency started 33 proceedings on the assessment of the internal system and its implementation with standards at all higher education institutions. It can be stated that the structures of the internal system managed the most fundamental challenges of this complex task without complications and created all the prerequisites for its successful completion by issuing the relevant decisions within the limit set by law.

2.2. Strategy, objectives and working plan for 2023

Following the mission and vision, the Agency formulated its strategic objectives in the [SAAHE Development Strategy for 2022-2027](#). It defined three strategic areas of development:

1. Development of accreditation activities
2. Development of international cooperation
3. Developing the culture of quality

The strategic objectives were further developed into the [2023 SAAHE Working Plan for 2023 with an outlook to 2024](#). It builds on the previous plan, and during its preparation, the conclusions of the [Annual Evaluation of the Internal System of SAAHE for 2022](#), which were discussed by the Executive Board of the Agency at its meeting of 14.3.2023, were taken into account.

Within the area of accreditation activities, the most important task was the initiation of the assessment of the compliance of the internal systems of higher education institutions and their implementation with the standards for the internal system at all 33 higher education institutions based in the Slovak Republic. In addition, the Agency counted on requests from higher education institutions for accreditation of study programmes. Within the field of international cooperation, the Agency was waiting for the results of the ENQA panel for the purpose of registration in EQAR and acceptance as a full member of ENQA.

In the strategic area of culture of quality, the Agency planned to analyse the system of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic with an emphasis on a survey of student satisfaction in doctoral studies and on the analysis of information related to the internal systems of higher education institutions provided in their internal evaluation (self-assessment) reports.

In addition to tasks and measures reflecting the Agency's strategic objectives, the working plan also includes other tasks resulting from its current internal needs and input from the external environment.

2.3. Evaluation of the working plan

Pursuant to Article 8 par. 7 of the SAAHE internal quality assurance system, the Agency carried out the following annual verification of the fulfilment of the tasks of the working plan:

Target	Identification of the task/measure	Timeline	Fulfilment status
1. Strategic area: accreditation activities			
Development of accreditation standards	Adjustment of standards for the study programme focused on the specificities of teacher study programmes	3Q 2023	in fulfillment
	Adjustment of accreditation standards after the evaluation of assessments of internal systems of higher education institutions	4Q 2024	outdated
Development of accreditation procedures	Ongoing evaluation of accreditation procedures with emphasis on the knowledge gained during on-site visits when assessing the internal systems of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic	1Q 2023- 1Q 2024	in fulfillment
	Adjustment of accreditation procedures following evaluation of assessments of internal systems of higher education institutions	4Q 2024	outdated

Development of professionalism and competence of the members of the Agency's bodies, review panels and employees of the Agency	Continuous training and preparation of the members of the working groups for assessing the internal systems of higher education institutions	1Q 2023 - 3Q 2023	fulfilled
	Training of the Agency employees on relevant national legislation	2Q 2023- 2Q 2024	fulfilled
	ESG-related educational stays and trainings for selected Agency employees	2Q 2023- 4Q 2023	fulfilled
2. Strategic area: international cooperation			
Increasing the involvement of international experts in the Agency's activities	Supplementing the list of reviewers with international reviewers with an emphasis on ESG oriented persons and external quality assurance in higher education	2Q 2023- 2Q 2024	continuously fulfilled
Development of cooperation with partner agencies abroad	Exchanging experiences and good practices with partner organisations abroad	2Q 2023- 2Q 2024	continuously fulfilled
	Active participation in the V4 Forum event	3Q 2023	fulfilled
	Active participation in the work of the ENQA review panel for academic Integrity	2Q 2023- 4Q 2023	fulfilled
Achievement of full membership of the Agency in ENQA and registration of the Agency in EQAR.	On-site assessment of the Agency by a panel of ENQA experts	1Q 2023	fulfilled
	Statement by the Agency on the factual aspect of the evaluation report of the ENQA expert panel	2Q 2023	fulfilled
	Evaluation of the experts' recommendations in the ENQA evaluation report	3Q 2023- 4Q 2023	in fulfillment
3. Strategic area: culture of quality			
Development of cooperation with stakeholders	Meetings and events with stakeholders to optimise external and internal quality assurance processes in higher education	1Q 2023- 4Q 2024	continuously fulfilled
Establishment and development of a system for the dissemination of good practices in the field of quality assurance in higher education	Evaluation of good practices from the findings of the working groups assessing the internal systems of higher education institutions and preparation of a catalogue of good practices	1Q 2024- 3Q 2024	outdated
	Publication of a catalogue of good practices on the Agency's website	4Q 2024	outdated

Implementation of analyses of the higher education system	PhD student satisfaction survey – data collection	3Q 2023	fulfilled
	PhD student satisfaction survey – evaluation and presentation of results and thematic report	4Q 2023	fulfilled
	Analysis of the structure of internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions based on the evaluation of the documents for their assessment	4Q 2023	fulfilled
	Analysis and findings from the first assessments of compliance of internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions with standards	4Q 2024	outdated
4. Other priorities and tasks			
System of the Agency's internal regulations	Amendment of selected internal regulations of the Agency	2Q 2023	fulfilled
Information infrastructure of the Agency	Processing of the Agency's information security audit	2Q 2023	fulfilled
	Evaluation and implementation of the Agency's information security audit recommendations	3Q 2023-1Q 2024	in fulfillment

We note that out of a total of 24 tasks, 12 have been completed and 7 are in the process of being completed or, given their nature, are being carried out on an ongoing basis. 5 tasks are not due as of the date of preparation of this report and will be reflected in the 2024 working plan with an outlook to 2025. The evaluation of the implementation of the plan does not include unfulfilled tasks.

3. PRINCIPLES AND POLICY OF THE INTERNAL SYSTEM

In pursuing its mission, vision, principles and strategic objectives, the Agency applies policies of independence, transparency, integrity and professionalism, cooperation and improvement. These are the basic components of its internal system that are critically evaluated, and the extent of their fulfilment is reflected in the Agency's further activities.

3.1. Independence

The institutional independence of SAAHE is determined by its legally defined status and the power to make final decisions. Procedural decisions are taken by the Executive Board - a collective body of the Agency, whose composition changed in 2023 due to the expiration of the mandate of two members. The nomination principles defined by law were respected in the appointment of new members and it can be concluded that there were no changes in the composition of the Executive Board that could affect the independence of its decision-making.

In the course of 2023, the Executive Board decided autonomously, based on the results of the expert assessment of the appointed review panel, the applicant's opinion on the evaluation report or other available information, in accordance with the [Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board](#).

The independence and autonomy of the Agency is also supported by the Board of Appeal. Pursuant to § 20 par. 8 of the Quality Assurance Act, the Board of Appeal is to have five members and two alternates appointed and dismissed by the Minister based on the results of the selection process. Due to the death of the Chairman of the Board of Appeal, the number of its members decreased to four as of 7/29/2023, which does not meet the minimum number of five members set by the Quality Assurance Act. At the beginning of August 2023, the Agency requested the Ministry to resolve this situation, which, however, did not change until the end of 2023.

The independent performance of assessment is also determined by the constitution and composition of the review panels of the Executive Board. We note that in 2023 the Agency created review panels without interference from third parties, in accordance with the [Principles for registration in the list of reviewers, removal from the list of reviewers and the creation of Executive Board review panels](#) and the [Conflict of interest regulation for members of the authorities, members of review panels, Executive Board and employees of SAAHE](#). All members were required to make their opinions independent of those of the home institution, i.e. they process them solely on the basis of their expertise (the members of the review panel provided a declaration of absence of conflict of interest in the request for an opinion of the review panel member). The valorization of remuneration rates and ancillary expenses for members of the review panels of the Executive Board also contributed to strengthening independence.

The financial independence of the Agency was also strengthened in 2023 by increasing the share of funds obtained from fees for the assessment of the internal quality assurance system of higher education, excluding revenues with the state budget.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

Institutional and procedural independence is centrally determined by the Quality Assurance Act. The Agency will actively participate in the legislative proposals for changes that determine this area.

In the context of the periodic renewal of members of the executive bodies, the Agency will promote, in discussions with stakeholders, the requirements of independence of members of the bodies and the elimination or reduction of the weight of determinants of a subjective nature.

As part of the external assessment of the Agency by the ENQA Panel (ESG Standards 3.1 and ESG 3.3):

2. The panel recommends that the Agency gives further consideration to the ways in which it can engage students within its governance structure and secure their involvement in the development of its policies and procedures, taking into consideration the opinion and independence of the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions.

3. The panel recommends that the Agency gives consideration to promoting further engagement of female representatives within its governance structure.

4. The Panel recommends that the Agency considers the need for any further safeguards to ensure its ability to function as a fully independent organisation.

3.2. Transparency

The basic principle of the Agency's work is openness and the highest possible degree of transparency. The Agency publishes available and communicates relevant documents and information about its activities and decisions in such a way as to maintain a high level of trust among all stakeholders and the public.

In 2023, it can be stated that the Agency:

- Created and developed appropriate ways of informing about the activity, progress and results of its main external quality assurance activity;
- Ensured public access to standards, procedures and results of external quality assurance in order to maintain high trust among all stakeholders and the public;
- Published the objectives, policies and procedures of its internal system, as well as reports on their implementation;
- Published thematic reports related to the higher education system;
- Published all documents and information required by the Quality Assurance Act as well as other laws by which the Agency is bound (e.g. Act No. 211/2000 Coll. on free access to information).

The Agency monitors and evaluates the impact of the information disclosed. In addition to the SAAHE website, the Agency maintains two social media accounts, Facebook and LinkedIn.

In 2023, the Agency's website www.saavs.sk had 5 902 users (20.7 % new users and 21.6 % regular users, of which 73.4 % were Slovak). The most frequent channels from which they visit the Agency's website are especially the higher education institutions themselves, the media or other partners or stakeholders (RVŠ, SRK, ENQA,...) The most frequently searched information are standards, a card with information for submitting applications to the list of assessors, applications for granting accreditation for a study programme, a guide for assessors and the decisions of the Executive Board .

The social network [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com) is used by the Agency mainly for the purpose of communication with the professional community and partners of the Agency abroad. The most popular articles were about foreign cooperation - especially in the months of May, June and July, when employees participated in foreign seminars. The most numerous reactions to published articles come from foreign reviewers and foreign partners, which proves the effectiveness of LinkedIn in establishing foreign relations and establishing contacts abroad.

The highest interest was in the information published on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com) in 2023, and the Agency published 18 articles on different topics on Facebook. The total annual reach was 14 030 accounts. Among the most successful posts for 2023 are articles on the registration of the Agency in the European database EQAR, or a discussion with representatives of sector councils.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

The Agency will reevaluate the layout of information on its website, taking into account the easy accessibility of the most sought-after data, and incorporate any comments resulting from the audit on the protection of personal data stored on the Agency's website and social networks. The Agency will also make the publication of its decisions transparent and automated.

As part of the external assessment of the Agency by the ENQA Panel (ESG Standard 2.6):

6. The panel recommends that the Agency gives further consideration to providing clear and accessible information about the outcomes of its review activity in a readily accessible format on its website.

3.3. Integrity and professionalism

The Agency promotes the principle of integrity in all activities and ensure its implementation. Members of the bodies of the Agency, reviewers and employees perform their tasks honestly, conscientiously and impartially, knowing that they are pursuing a public interest.

The agency upheld the principles of integrity and professionalism by fulfilling the following requirements:

- Every person involved in the activities of the Agency has sufficient competence to carry out the entrusted activities. The professional expertise of members of the Agency's bodies, reviewers and Agency employees is developed.
- In all activities related to external quality assurance, possible bias and conflicts of interests are avoided.
- Care is taken to observe the principle of equal treatment and protection against intolerance and discrimination of any kind, while the Agency makes decisions in accordance with the principle of legitimate expectations, so that in factually similar cases there are no unjustified differences between procedures and decisions.
- Members of the Agency's bodies, reviewers, employees and contractors are required to behave in accordance with the Agency's ethical standards and regulations, generally binding legal regulations and rules.

The Agency has and follows procedures to ensure the professionalism and integrity of its activities, in particular: [Principles for registration in the list of reviewers, removal from the list of reviewers and the creation of Executive Board review panels](#), [Conflict of Interest Regulation for members of the authorities, members of review panels, Executive Board and employees of SAAHE](#), [Code of ethics and professional conduct](#), [Directive on the internal system of verification of notifications of anti-social activities of SAAHE](#), which was amended in 2023. In 2023, the Agency monitored compliance with those policies and checked for deficiencies in professional conduct, confidentiality, ethics and integrity of the implemented activities.

The year 2023 was marked by day-to-day work and constant interaction with the list of reviewers in connection with the start of assessment of internal systems and their implementation in all higher education institutions. For those areas identified as insufficiently covered, candidates were targeted, especially among prominent experts in the relevant field. At its meetings in 2023, the Executive Board approved the entry of 17 reviewers, 9 of them foreign. 36 student reviewers were also added to the list of reviewers. In 2023, the Executive Board also approved the removal of 26 reviewers. The most common reason was the incompatibility of the reviewer's position with his/her current function at the workplace or the lack of compliance with the reviewer's requirements (in particular, the completion of the student's studies – 7 cases).

Review panels for assessment of internal systems were created in accordance with the Quality Assurance Act and in accordance with the internal regulation [Principles for registration in the list of reviewers, removal from the list of reviewers and the creation of Executive Board review panels](#). Much attention was also paid to the internationalisation of the review panels.

Of the total number of reviewers involved, more than 130 were foreign, which is more than 43%. More than 50 reviewers were involved in two or more review panels.

In 2023, the Agency conducted several types of training for the reviewers, mainly in connection with their preparation for assessing the internal systems of higher education institutions. In February 2023, a two-day face-to-face training focused on the future chairs of the internal systems assessment review panels took place. The training focused on the main objectives and purpose of the assessment of the internal system, the legislative framework and assessment procedures, the planned course of proceedings, the creation and composition of review panels and the drafting of evaluation reports. Three times in 2023, an online training for foreign reviewers took place, focusing mainly on the specificities of the legislative framework in the Slovak Republic, a description of the functioning of the higher education system and on individual types of assessments. Online training was also held for reviewers from practice and student reviewers. It was mainly focused to the most important standards for the internal system from the point of view of these two stakeholders. For the new role of review panel secretaries, a series of three online training sessions focused on individual parts of the assessment followed. The creation of review panels was followed by a series of online meetings and trainings specifically aimed at assessing the higher education institutions concerned.

The Agency paid close attention to the professional development and training of employees and also monitored their self-education requirements. In connection with increasing the professionalization of its employees, the Agency carried out 27 domestic and 4 foreign trainings.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

The Agency will continue to pay attention to the professional development of its employees. Based on the evaluation of feedback from employees, reviewers and stakeholders, the Agency will optimise its procedures and processes.

As part of the external assessment of the Agency by the ENQA Panel (ESG 3.6):

4. The panel affirms the Agency's intention to increase the involvement of international reviewers in its review activities.
5. The panel supports the Agency's intention to improve the feedback system linking the monitoring of the work of the review panels to the reliability and integrity of review outcomes.

3.4. Cooperation and partnership

As part of its activities, the Agency cooperates with stakeholders and other similarly focused institutions at national and international level. Key to the development of the Agency is the development of effective channels of communication with external stakeholders, in particular public authorities, higher education institutions and their representations, foreign partners, stakeholders and the general public, in order to monitor the changing conditions, demands and expectations of society and to strengthen and broaden awareness of the need to develop a culture of quality in higher education.

The main areas of cooperation in 2023 mainly related mainly to the Agency's activities in connection with the external assessment process for ENQA and EQAR membership and, in this context, the visit of ENQA reviewers to the Agency's headquarters in March 2023. On this occasion, the cooperation was also subject to an external assessment and all stakeholders had the opportunity to evaluate it.

From stakeholders, the Agency has intensive relations mainly with the Ministry, in particular in cooperation in the field of fulfilling tasks from the renewal plan and specification of new functionalities of the registers of study fields and study programmes, which are implemented under the Ministry's management.

The Agency's cooperation with stakeholders representing higher education institutions – the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Council of Higher Education and the Students' Council for Higher Education – was also important. The representatives of the Agency were regular guests at the meetings and conferences organised by the above-mentioned representations, which deepened the mutual discussion and cooperation in solving problems. In 2023, two members of the Executive Board were also nominated by the Council of Higher Education and the Student Council for Higher Education.

Employers, either directly or through their representative associations, entered into discussions with the Agency in specific areas related to quality assurance in higher education. On 28 February 2023, the Agency held a meeting with representatives of the Alliance of Sector Councils and Employers' Organisations regarding the upcoming accreditations of higher education institutions. The aim of the meeting was mainly to exchange information on cooperation with higher education institutions. The subject of employers' interest was not only in the prepared accreditation mechanisms, review panel structures or professional study programmes, but especially the issues of the employability of graduates. The Agency was also interested in the real experiences of employers from cooperation with higher education institutions and their meaningful involvement within the structures of internal systems at individual higher education institutions.

In the area of internationalisation and anchoring the Agency in international coordinates, 2023 was exceptionally important, especially in connection with the Agency's ambitions for international anchoring and recognition of its quality assurance practices in higher education. In 2023, the Agency successfully completed an external assessment by ENQA, which resulted in the publication of the [ENQA external review report](#). This evaluation was subsequently attached to the Agency's application for registration in EQAR. The positive decision was granted to the Agency on 15 December 2023 and the Agency also subsequently received full membership in ENQA.

In order to increase the international prestige of the Agency and thus the prestige of accredited higher education institutions (especially their medical faculties), SAAHE has decided to be recognised and registered in the database of the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME). Based on suggestions from the environment of medical faculties, the Executive Board of SAAHE decided at its meeting on 15. 6. 2023 take the necessary steps towards its registration and recognition by WFME. This activity of the Agency was also supported by the Ministry. The first step was the preparation and submission of a preliminary application (Eligibility Application), which was sent on 28 June 2023. The WFME soon officially confirmed the eligibility of SAAHE to apply for recognition status (Recognition Status). Immediately after the confirmation of eligibility, work started on the complete application and on the specification of a specific on-site visit, where WFME reviewers would be present to monitor SAAHE's procedures, rules and processes during a specific assessment. For this purpose, the Jessenius Faculty of Medicine of the Comenius University in Bratislava was selected, and on 29 November 2023, together with the SAAHE review panel, a group of WFME expert reviewers also participated. The next stage will be the monitoring of the process of creating an evaluation report and, in particular, the decision-making process of the Executive Board on the compliance of the internal system with the standards at Comenius University

and on the compliance of the study field of general medicine with the standards for the study programme. We expect a final decision on the inclusion of SAAHE in the WFME database at the end of 2024.

In 2023, the Agency continued to be an active member in the V4QA Platform – Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries. The main objectives of the Forum are the regular exchange of experience in the field of quality assurance, the development of an international network of experts and the exchange of reviewers and staff of V4 countries' agencies.

On 11-12 October 2023, the V4QA Forum was held in Prague, hosted by the Czech accreditation organisation, National Accreditation Office for Higher Education (NAÚ). In addition to the exchange of experience in the field of quality assurance in higher education, other topics included planned changes and innovations in the accreditation and evaluation processes, as well as future tasks and challenges related to quality assurance in higher education.

Within European organizations, the Agency has been a member of the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) since its inception. Its aim is to transfer European principles and experience in the development of academic integrity to the higher education environment in the Slovak Republic. In 2023, work focused mainly on solving problems in cases of improper behaviour and unethical practices in research and education.

The Agency also regularly participates in the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) event, which took place in 2023 on 23-25 November in Aveiro, Portugal. The main topics were internationalisation in a changing world and new trends and challenges in the field of quality assurance.

In order to create a list of legal entities pursuant to § 4 par. 2 letter c) point 2 of the Quality Assurance Act, whose evaluation reports are automatically recognised by the Agency for the purposes of assessing compliance of the internal system and its implementation with the internal system standards, agreements (memorandums) were signed with the agencies: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres). The Executive Board subsequently decided to include these organisations in the list according to § 4 par. 2 letter c) point 2 of the Quality Assurance Act.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

In 2023, the Agency recorded a successful stage in the field of cooperation and partnership. The challenge in the coming period is active participation in ENQA projects in improving the principles and procedures of quality assurance (QA-FIT). The goal is also the successful completion of the decision-making process on the inclusion of SAAHE in the WFME database. An important activity and opportunity to take advantage of the partnership with stakeholders will be the evaluation of feedback after the completion of the assessment of the internal systems of higher education institutions.

3.5. Improvements

The policy of continuous improvement is a key principle of the Agency's operation. In relation to its fulfillment, the Agency:

- systematically monitors the development tendencies in higher education and quality assurance systems;

- regularly adapts and innovates the internal and external quality assurance standards and procedures;
- regularly monitors, evaluates and revises the policies, procedures and processes of its internal system agenda with the involvement of stakeholders;
- submits recommendations for innovation to stakeholders so that the synergistic outcome of these efforts is to improve the quality and to consolidate the status and recognition of higher education institutions;
- develops internal and external feedback mechanisms for the purpose of continuous improvement of the activities performed.

All these activities were implemented and monitored in 2023. The reflection of this activity is in other parts of the report.

3.5.1. Analysis of the higher education environment

In accordance with the policy of continuous improvement, the Agency monitors the state and development tendencies of the higher education environment. In this context, it conducted a survey of students' opinions on the quality of education in doctoral studies. The aim of the survey, supported by the Ministry, was to find out the perception of the quality of education by students at the 3rd level of higher education in the Slovak Republic. In accordance with the principles of quality assurance in Europe, it was not only about finding out their views on the fulfilment of educational objectives, but also about the experience of PhD students and PhD graduates with the education itself.

The initial findings from the survey are presented in the published [Thematic Report on Initial Findings from the Survey of Students' Views on the Quality of Education in Doctoral Studies](#). It contains the first results regarding the perception of the quality of the doctoral study provided from the students' point of view, the evaluation of the answers to closed questions and, in some cases, also in the second-level classification. Once all responses have been fully processed, the Agency will prepare and publish a summary report with further classifications and processing of responses to open questions, i.e. freely formulated responses.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

The Agency will focus on a comprehensive evaluation of the findings of the survey carried out and publish the results in a comprehensive report. The goal of the analyses is to systematically work with the findings and present them more convincingly, which could contribute to the elimination of shortcomings and the improvement of higher education.

As part of the external assessment of the Agency by the ENQA Panel (ESG 3.1 and ESG 3.4):

1. The Agency is encouraged to include a focus on the enhancement of the quality of student experience as part of its procedures for accreditation.
3. The Agency may wish to give further consideration to how its reports can show developments, trends and areas of good practice and persistent difficulty in higher education provision.

3.5.2. Monitoring and improving quality assurance standards

One of the Agency's key competences is to develop, monitor and innovate standards for quality assurance ([Standards for the study programme](#), [Standards for the internal system](#) and [Standards for the habilitation and inauguration proceedings](#)). The ongoing activity of

assessing internal systems in all higher education institutions provides space for monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of standards with the aim of optimising them after the appropriate evaluation of feedback after the end of this process.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

The Agency's tasks for improving standards in 2024 will be to:

- monitor and evaluate the level of implementation of the Agency's individual standards based on ongoing assessments of internal systems;
- in cooperation with representatives of interested parties and based on the evaluation of feedback, consider amending the standards for the study programme and standards for the internal system;
- in relation to legislative changes and in cooperation with representatives of stakeholders, amend the standards for habilitation proceeding and inaugural proceeding,

3.5.3. Complaints and appeals

The Agency's priority is to closely examine complaints received under the Complaints Handling Directive and to take appropriate measures for improvement. In 2023, the Agency did not register a complaint about its activities.

The Board of Appeal held one meeting in 2023. On the 7 October 2023, it assessed the objections of the Pan-European University in Bratislava against the decision on the amount of the fee for the application to assess the internal quality assurance system of higher education as prematurely submitted. The request for payment of the fee does not have the nature of any decision and the Board of Appeal was therefore unable to examine the objections filed.

On the 29 July 2023, the activity of the Board of Appeal was fundamentally affected by the death of its chairman, prof. Ing. Jozef Mihok, PhD. Since then, the Board of Appeal has had only four members. The meeting of the Board of Appeal was convened at 18. 10. 2023, where the objections of the University of Veterinary Medicine and Pharmacy in Košice were planned to be discussed in two proceedings. The meeting was cancelled due to the absence of the required number of members of the Board of Appeal, which is stipulated in § 9 par. 2 of the Quality Assurance Act for five members and two alternates.

Already in early August 2023, the Agency requested the Ministry to resolve this situation, which remained unchanged until the end of 2023.

3.5.4. Development and improvement of external quality assurance processes

After aligning their system with the standards, higher education institutions were required to ask the Agency for a first assessment of the internal system by 31 December 2022. By 31 December 2022, all 33 higher education institutions had fulfilled their obligation to ask the Agency for a first assessment of the internal system. After receiving the applications, the Agency checked their completeness. The Agency evaluated the applications of the three higher education institutions as incomplete and called on the schools to supplement the application documents. All three schools completed the applications within the deadline. Subsequent payment of the fee for the assessment of the internal system in accordance with the approved fee schedule started proceedings at all 33 higher education institutions. One

internal system assessment procedure was launched at the end of 2022, all other procedures were launched in 2023.

Each school was required to submit an internal evaluation report on the implementation of its internal quality assurance system for higher education, as part of the mandatory application documents. All schools fulfilled this obligation. In this context, in 2023 the Agency produced a thematic report [Initial analysis of internal evaluation reports of higher education institutions on the implementation of the internal quality assurance system for higher education](#). It provides an initial summary view of the internal evaluation reports of higher education institutions (self-assessment reports) that were submitted for applications for the first assessment of the internal system. These reports were supposed to be one of the key communication tools to ensure that the quality assurance structures and processes in higher education at the school function optimally, are monitored, and create the space and conditions for their improvement. An analytical view of the internal evaluation reports of higher education institutions was processed mainly on the basis of their structure and content, in relation to the Agency's manual for their processing and in relation to the general characteristics usual for self-assessment reports. The report does not avoid critical discursive analysis in order to provide a summarizing evaluation view of all internal evaluation reports submitted by higher education institutions. Such a comprehensive view has made it possible to generalise some of their common characteristics and indicate possible room for improvement of this important part of the external evaluation of quality assurance in higher education.

Once all procedures have been completed, the Agency will perform a comprehensive evaluation of the feedback and use these results to further improve its system and processes.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

The Agency will use the results of monitoring and feedback for further optimisation and changes to the accreditation procedures (especially methodology), optimisation of the work of review panels, the consistency of the evaluation reports, comparability of the evaluation, etc. The Agency's information system will also be developed in this direction.

As part of the external assessment of the Agency by the ENQA Panel (ESG 3.1, ESG 2.1, ESG 2.2 and ESG 2.5):

1. The panel recommends that the Agency should consider how the internal quality assurance systems can help to address the issue of employability in the design or review of study programmes.
2. The Agency could consider taking further steps to reduce the administrative and bureaucratic burden of quality assurance for higher education institutions.
5. The panel recommends that the Agency gives further consideration to the application of its methodology to PhD programmes.
6. The panel suggests that SAAHE should consider further refinement of its process, where possible, to reduce the administrative load on institutions.
7. The panel endorses the Agency's intention to update its methodology on a regular basis and to consider other aspects of internal quality assurance in the evaluation process, particularly with regard to the verification of corrective actions.
8. With regard to the State approval of private higher education institutions the Agency should consider providing a statement to indicate how Part 1 of the ESG will be covered in the assessment of applications.

9. The panel encourages SAAHE to give further consideration to the procedure for ensuring the consistency of outcomes from different review panels.

3.5.5. Evaluation and revision of internal system policies

The Agency regularly monitors, evaluates and revises the policies and procedures of the Agency's internal system. Based on the results of feedback, changes to legislation or changes in internal processes, it issued two new and amended 15 internal regulations, including the Statute:

1. New internal regulations:

Number	Title of the internal regulation	Date of approval
1/2023	Directive on the use of a company vehicle of SAAHE	approved on 26. 1. 2023
2/2023	Rules for conducting business activities of SAAHE	approved on 29. 9. 2023

2. Amended internal regulations:

Number	Title of the internal regulation	Date of approval
2/2019	SAAHE Statute	approved on 26. 1. 2023
3/2022	Directive on the remuneration of members of the review panels of SAAHE's Executive Board and the reimbursement of related incidental expenses	approved on 26. 1. 2023
5/2019	Management of the conflict of interests of members of collective bodies, members of review panels of the Executive Board and employees of SAAHE	approved on 16. 2. 2023
8/2019	Internal Labour Rules of SAAHE	approved on 14. 3. 2023
5/2020	Directive on the establishment of procedures for public procurement of the procuring entity SAAHE	approved on 14. 3. 2023
12/2019	SAAVŠ Accounting Directive	approved on 18. 5. 2023
13/2020	Directive on the procedure for financial control of SAAHE	approved on 18. 5. 2023
14/2019	Directive on the circulation of accounting documents of SAAHE	approved on 18. 5. 2023
10/2020	Directive on the handling of complaints of SAAHE	approved on 31. 8. 2023
16/2019	Directive on the provision of meal tickets for SAAHE employees	approved on 29. 9. 2023

11/2019	Directive on the creation and use of the Social Fund for SAAHE employees	approved on 29. 9. 2023
7/2020	Directive on travel compensation of employees of SAAHE	approved on 29. 9. 2023
8/2020	Directive on the internal system for the screening of whistleblowing by SAAHE	approved on 19. 10. 2023
4/2020	Directive on the use of payment cards of SAAHE	approved on 19. 10. 2023
10/2019	Directive on expenses and management of budgetary resources for representational and promotional purposes of SAAHE	approved on 19. 10. 2023
8/2019	Rules of Procedure of SAAHE	approved on 14. 12. 2023

In connection with its activities, the Agency paid close attention to improving the functionalities of the information system, both in terms of complementing the necessary functionalities and increasing cybersecurity. These activities were initiated as early as 2022 in connection with the preparatory phase of proceedings on the assessment of the internal systems of higher education institutions. Their goal was to contribute to the simplification and automation of processes on the part of higher education institutions and to facilitate their further processing on the part of the Agency. Furthermore, the processes for processing applications for study programme accreditation were unified with the processes of processing applications for assessment of the internal quality assurance system.

This activity was followed up by modifications and additions to the information system in 2023. These were mainly changes in connection with the agenda of the mandate contracts of members of the review panels and the subsequent settlement of their financial requirements (remuneration and reimbursement of incidental expenses), but also to the necessary incorporation of the requirements arising from the GDPR regulations.

An important addition was the implementation of a tool for sending mass emails to support the completed doctoral survey.

In order to increase the cybersecurity of SAAHE's information systems, an information and cybersecurity audit was prepared in November 2023. On its basis, the Agency, as a public authority, was identified as the so-called provider of a basic service and, at its own request, was included in the register of providers of basic services with effect from 1 January 2024 by the decision of the National Security Office dated 22.12.2023. It is therefore covered by comprehensive legislation on information systems and technologies in public administration and cybersecurity.

Reflection, proposals and challenges

In connection with internal processes, the Agency will prioritize aspects of cybersecurity. It will be necessary to adopt an information security strategy, analyse the risks and take the necessary measures in this area.

4. EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE ASSESSMENT

In 2023, the Agency completed the first external evaluation of its internal system in accordance with Article 9 of Internal Regulation No. 1/2022 [Internal Quality Assurance System of SAAHE activities](#). It was launched in 2022 and implemented, at the Agency's request, by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The visit of the ENQA Expert Panel to the Agency's headquarters in March 2023 was its final stage of assessment and resulted in the publication of a positive evaluation report.

The evaluation report *“analyses the compliance of the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (Slovenská akreditačná agentúra pre vysoké školstvo, SAAHE) with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted between September 2022 and September 2023. The review was conducted for the purposes of membership of ENQA and for inclusion in the EQAR”*. In summary, the ENQA review panel notes that: *“in light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, the SAAHE is in compliance with the ESG”*.

Within the ENQA evaluation report, there are 9 commendations, 6 recommendations and 9 suggestions for further improvement – these are also included in the submitted evaluation of the internal system.

5. CONCLUSION

In 2023, the Agency evaluated its internal system in accordance with Article 8 of Internal Regulation No. 1/2022 [Internal Quality Assurance System of SAAHE activities](#). As part of this evaluation, it carried out an evaluation of the annual working plan and reviewed the related processes in order to determine progress in fulfillment of the mission and policies of the internal system. As part of this process, the Agency also drew heavily on the conclusions of an external assessment carried out by the ENQA expert panel.

Recommendations and proposals for further development and improvement of the internal system policies, processes and procedures presented to in the text of the report will be part of the Agency's working plan for 2024 with an outlook to 2025.