

National action plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic



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National action plan for external quality assurance of higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic

1. Introduction

This action plan is 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)*, which 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 the “Agency”) participated in the creation of the action plan. The objectives set out herein are based on the conclusions of a 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 comparisons of practices and experience from other countries. A meeting with experts took place on 25th and 26th 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, the Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Sector-driven Innovation project were also invited.

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 objective of the action plan is to establish the objectives and steps within the ongoing transformation of the quality assurance system. Its task is to identify the most problematic areas and present measurable indicators (desired outcomes) that will ensure a functional and effective system of external quality assurance of higher education at the national level.

1.1 Higher education system in the Slovak Republic

There are 34 higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic, of which 20 are public, 3 are state institutions and 11 are private institutions.¹ A graduate obtains a higher education degree by completing a study programme within a field of study or a combination of two fields of study. A new system of study fields containing 48 study fields entered into force on 1st September 2019. Three degrees – bachelor’s, master’s/engineering, and doctoral are awarded for the successful completion of higher education study. Higher education institutions offered a total of 6,498 accredited study programmes as of 1 March 2021. Of these, 2,305 were at the first level of study (NQF/EQF² level: 6), 1,937 were at the second or combined first and second level of study (NQF/EQF level: 7), and 2,256 were at the third level of study (NQF/EQF level: 8).

¹ In addition to them, five branches of foreign universities whose activities are regulated by the legal regulations of the state in which they are established, are authorized to provide higher education in the territory of the Slovak Republic.

² National Qualifications Framework and European Qualifications Framework

Higher education institutions offer 3,454 full-time accredited study programmes and 3,044 part-time study programmes. In the full-time form, study according to the recommended study plan depends on the complexity of the student's work in the range of 1500 to 1800 hours per academic year, including independent study and independent creative activity. In the external form, study according to the recommended study plan depends on the complexity of the student's work in the range of 750 to 1440 hours per academic year, including independent study and independent creative activity.

In the 2002/2003 academic year, the Slovak Republic instituted a credit system expressing the standard student workload in ECTS, which represents 60 credits for one academic year in the full-time form of study.

The standard length of study for bachelor's degree programmes is

- three academic years (180 credits) or four academic years (240 credits) in full-time form; and
- four academic years (180 credits) or five academic years (240 credits) in part-time form.

The standard length of study for master's degree programmes is

- one (60 credits), two (120 credits), or three (180 credits) academic years in full-time form; and
- two (60 credits), three (120 credits), or four (180 credits) academic years in part-time form.

The standard length of study for combined bachelor's and master's degree programmes is

- five academic years (300 credits) or six academic years (360 credits) in full-time form; and
- seven academic years (300 credits) or eight academic years (360 credits) in part-time form.

The standard length of study for Ph.D. programmes is

- three academic years (180 credits) or four academic years (240 credits) in full-time form; and
- four academic years (180 credits) or five academic years (240 credits) in part-time form.

The system of habilitation proceedings and proceedings for the appointment of professors (inauguration proceedings) is a specific feature of Slovak higher education. Those institutions with accreditation for such proceedings in a particular field may award graduates with the scientific-pedagogical or artistic-pedagogical title of associate professor and professor. In the past, the prerequisite for filling the position of associate professor or professor was obtaining the relevant title, which partially limited the possibility of filling these positions by experts from abroad and high quality teachers who had not yet undergone habilitation proceedings or inauguration proceedings. At present, this position can also be held by persons who have not yet obtained the relevant title, but who meet the criteria for filling the position. The Agency also reflected the need for the accreditation of habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings by issuing separate accreditation standards.

1.2 Quality assurance system of higher education in the Slovak Republic

a) Legal framework ensuring compliance with the ESG 2015 and the independence of the Agency

The general legal framework for the activities of higher education institutions is stipulated in Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education Institutions and Amendments to Certain Acts and Decrees of the Ministry. The activities of the Agency and the quality assurance system are enshrined in Act No. 269/2018 Coll. on Quality Assurance of Higher Education, the amendment to Act No. 343/2015 Coll. on Public Procurement and the amendments to certain acts, as amended (hereinafter referred to as the "Quality Assurance Act").

The Quality Assurance Act established the Agency as an independent public-law institution. In relation to the Agency's organization, the Quality Assurance Act defined the Agency's authorities, the method of filling the positions of these authorities and the Agency's financing.

The supreme decision-making authority of the Agency is the Executive Board, which has nine members. Each of the representations of higher education institutions, i.e the Higher Education Council, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, and the Student Council of Higher Education, nominates two members of the Executive Board, while two members of the Executive Board are nominated by the employers' representatives. The ninth member is the chair of the Executive Board. Proposals for members of the Executive Board on behalf of employers' representatives are submitted by

- representative associations of employers;
- professional organizations established by law;
- the Slovak Academy of Sciences;
- legal entities to which the Ministry has issued a certificate of competence to perform research and development, except for higher education institutions and organizations of the Slovak Academy of Sciences; and
- State-recognized churches and religious societies.

Proposals submitted by higher education institutions representatives may only be rejected by the Minister of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as the "Minister") if the nominees do not meet the requirements set out in § 7 para. 5 or para. 6 of the Quality Assurance Act. The members of the Executive Board act independently and are not bound by the orders of the organizations that nominated them for the position, which is also enshrined in the legislation. The term of office of a member of the Executive Board is six years.

The chair of the Executive Board is appointed by the Minister of Education based on the results of the selection proceeding. The selection commission for the position of chair of the Executive Board has five members appointed by the Minister of Education. The Higher Education Council, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, the Student Council of Higher Education, and a representative association of employers each nominate one member of the commission. The fifth member of the commission is appointed by the Minister without a proposal.

Stakeholders shall also participate in the selection proceedings for members of the Agency's Board of Appeals and the Agency's controller by nominating members of the selection commissions. In both cases, the selection commission has three members appointed by the Minister of Education. The Higher Education Council, the Slovak Rectors' Conference, and the Student Council of Higher Education each nominate one member.

Pursuant to § 16 para. 2 of the Quality Assurance Act, the Minister may only dismiss a member of the Executive Board based on the proposal of the Executive Board or the Agency's controller if the competent authority finds that such member has violated legal or internal regulations of the Agency.

Pursuant to the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency's financing is provided from the following sources:

- fees for Agency activities;
- funds from the chapter of the Ministry of the state budget according to the Act on the state budget for the relevant budget year to ensure its activities;
- income from business activities; and
- other income.

The Quality Assurance Act defines the competencies of the Agency. Pursuant to § 4 of the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency decides on

- internal system compliance and implementation with the standards for the internal system;
- granting or not granting accreditation of a study programme;
- granting, not granting or withdrawing accreditation of habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings;
- imposition of corrective actions;

- suspension of the procedure for the application for consent to operate as a private institution (hereinafter referred to as “state consent”); and
- objection to bias against the proposed composition of the review panel.

Neither the Ministry, the Minister nor any other institution has the competence to interfere in the decision-making processes and activities of the Agency.

b) Compliance of the evaluation methodology and procedures with the procedures set out in the ESG 2015

The process of external quality assurance of higher education in the Slovak Republic takes into account the requirements of the ESG 2015 (section 2.3), according to which, these processes should be reliable, useful, predefined, consistently applied, and published. These processes specifically include:

- self-assessment or equivalent,
- external evaluation, which usually involves a site visit of the higher education institution,
- an evaluation report based on an external evaluation,
- consistent performance of follow-up actions.

As part of the evaluation of an institution’s internal quality assurance system or its application for granting the accreditation of a study programme, the relevant application also includes the institution’s self-assessment report (pursuant to § 24 (4) and § 30 (2) of the Quality Assurance Act). The Executive Board of the Agency shall create review panels of persons registered in the list of reviewers of the Agency for the purpose of evaluating the application of a higher education institution. A review panel will not be created if a higher education institution requests that another accreditation agency draw up an evaluation report for the purpose of evaluating the internal system.

The chair and members of a review panel are appointed and removed by the chair of the Executive Board with the prior agreement of the Executive Board (pursuant to § 8 (1) of the Quality Assurance Act). At least one student shall be a member of each review panel, (except for proceedings for granting or withdrawing the accreditation of habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings).

At the institution’s application or initiative, a review panel shall elaborate an evaluation report, based on which the Executive Board shall decide or express its opinion. The evaluation report is elaborated based on the expert evaluation of supporting documentation, available data and information, a higher education institution site visit, and consultations with stakeholders. The review panel shall also indicate in the evaluation report the facts that were the basis for its conclusions, the procedure for evaluating the documentation, the evaluation of the level of compliance with individual standards, identified deficiencies, recommendations for the proceeding’s participants, a proposal of the Agency decisions or statements and the names and surnames of the review panel members (pursuant to § 24 (5) of the Quality Assurance Act).

As a participant in the proceedings, the higher education institution may submit its opinion on the evaluation report within 15 working days from the date of delivery of the evaluation report.

The Quality Assurance Act imposes an obligation on the Agency to publish information on the proceedings (pursuant to § 4 (2)). The Agency publishes on its website the relevant institution’s applications, the evaluation reports of the review panels after discussions with the Executive Board, documents for the Agency’s decision or opinion and the opinion of the Agency’s Committee for Opposition Assessment (Board of Appeals) pursuant to § 21 para. 1 (b) and other information.

The Quality Assurance Act also defines the subsequent corrective actions that may be imposed on the institution based on the Agency's decision and the subsequent activities of the institution and the Agency. Pursuant to § 25 (2) of the Quality Assurance Act, corrective actions include:

- a) ordering of the elimination of deficiencies that caused the non-compliance of the internal system or its implementation with the Standards for the internal system;
- b) suspension of the delivery of a study programme;
- c) ordering of the revocation of a study programme;
- d) revocation of a study programme; and
- e) restrictions on the design and modification of study programmes.

Pursuant to § 24 (2) of the Quality Assurance Act, the Agency also performs ongoing monitoring of the institution's compliance with the Standards for the internal system at least once every two years.

The higher education institution may submit its objection to a decision or statement of the Agency within 15 working days from the date of delivery of the decision or statement, and the Board of Appeals shall address such objections within 90 days from the date of their delivery by the Agency.

These procedures and processes take into account the requirements of the ESG 2015 (section 2.3) and the Agency's role in the coming period will be to ensure the effective implementation of these procedures and processes.

c) Linking of national standards to Part I of the ESG 2015

With effect from 1 September 2020, the Agency issued Standards for the internal system; Standards for the study programme and Standards for habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings. The compliance of individual articles of the standards with ESG 2015 is described in the following table.

EHEA	Slovak Republic	Slovak Republic
Standards and Guidelines for QA in the EHEA (ESG2015)	Standards for the Higher Education Internal Quality Assurance System	Standards for Study Programmes
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	Article 2 Quality assurance policies	
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	Article 3 Design, modification and approval of study programmes	Article 2 Proposals and modifications
		Article 3 Approval of study programmes
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment	Article 4 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	Article 4 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition, and certification	Article 5 Student admission, progression, recognition and awarding of academic degrees	Article 5 Student admission, progression, recognition and awarding of academic degrees
1.5 Teaching staff	Article 6 Teaching staff	Article 6 Teaching staff
		Article 7 Research, artistic and other activities of a higher education institution
1.6 Learning resources and student support	Article 7 Learning resources and student support	Article 8 Learning resources and student support
1.7 Information management	Article 8 Information management	Article 9 Information management
1.8 Public information	Article 9 Public information	Article 10 Public information
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Article 10 On-going monitoring and periodic review and approval of study programmes	Article 11 On-going monitoring and periodic review and approval of study programmes
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	Article 11 Periodic external quality assurance	

d) Principles and criteria for the registration, to the list of reviewers, selection and training of reviewers

Individual applications and initiatives of higher education institutions are evaluated by review panels. The procedure of selecting experts for the purpose of creating review panels is determined by *Principles for Registration in the List of Reviewers, Removal from the List of Reviewers, and the Creation of Executive Board Review Panels* issued by the Agency. A person may be registered in the list of reviewers for 6 years, and such registration may be renewed. A person may be registered in the list of reviewers if s/he meets at least one of the following minimum requirements:

- has obtained a doctorate and has been working for at least 5 of the previous 15 years as an associate professor or professor at a higher education institution in the Slovak Republic;
- has obtained a master's degree and is an expert in economic or social practice;
- has obtained a doctorate, has been awarded a I or IIa degree scientific qualification, and has been working for at least 5 of the previous 15 years as a researcher in a research institution or at a higher education institution in the Slovak Republic;
- has obtained a doctorate and has been working for at least 5 of the previous 15 years as a professor or associate professor or in another similar position at a higher education institution abroad;
- has obtained a doctorate and has been working abroad for at least 5 of the previous 15 years as a researcher at a research institution other than a higher education institution;
- has obtained a master's degree and has demonstrable experience in the previous 15 years with the design, development and implementation of higher education quality assurance systems or quality assurance systems in institutions similar in size and complexity to higher education institutions;
- has obtained a master's degree, has been working in the field of art for at least 5 of the previous 15 years and his/her artistic activities are of demonstrable quality and internationally recognized; or
- is a student at a higher education institution.

The chair and members of the review panel are appointed and removed by the chair of the Executive Board with the prior agreement of the Executive Board. At least one student must be a member of each review panel, except for review panels evaluating habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings. Each review panel must also include a significant professional expert from practice. When creating review panels, the type of proceedings, the specificities of the study field and the reviewer's profile shall be taken into account. Only an expert who has already received the relevant training and does not have any conflicts of interest may be a member of a review panel.

e) Involvement of stakeholders in the external quality assurance system

The involvement of stakeholders in the quality assurance system of higher education in the Slovak Republic has several levels. At the level of the Agency's authorities, stakeholders are actively involved in the creation of the Agency's authorities (see point a) of this chapter).

At the Agency level, stakeholders are involved in the creation and activity of review panels. The review panels consist of academic staff (persons working in the last 15 years for at least 5 years as a professor or associate professor), students and persons from practice, thus ensuring the involvement of employers' representatives in the evaluation of the activities of the higher education institution. Stakeholders also participated in the creation of the accreditation standards and methodology for their evaluation. The standards proposal has been submitted for public comment.

The new quality assurance system requires the involvement of stakeholders, with an emphasis on students and employers also at the institution level. Accreditation standards do not precisely specify the higher education authorities in which stakeholders are to be represented. However, they

determine the processes in which they participate. Students, employers and other relevant stakeholders must be involved in the preparation of the proposal of a study programme. They also participate in the approval of a study programme, but they may not be the same persons as those involved in the process of designing the study programme. Stakeholders are also involved in monitoring the delivery of a study programme.

2. Priority areas of the action plan

2.1 Context of the current state of external quality assurance development in the Slovak Republic

The current period can be characterized by extensive changes in the quality assurance of higher education at Slovak higher education institutions. In the previous system, the study programmes were individually approved by the central accreditation body - Accreditation Commission, and the decisions were signed by the Minister of Education. The emphasis was placed on the formal fulfillment of accreditation criteria rather than on building a quality assurance system and quality culture.

The basis for the change in the quality assurance system was the adoption of the Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in 2018 by the National Council of the Slovak Republic. This Act introduced a legal framework respecting the architecture of the ESG 2015, based on which the Agency was constituted. The Agency subsequently prepared and issued accreditation standards with effect from 1 September 2020, a methodology for their evaluation and, based on these documents, began to guide higher education institutions in implementing their internal quality assurance systems following the ESG 2015.

Currently, higher education institutions are undergoing a phase of implementation and compliance with the wording of standards and are adjusting study programmes and internal systems to ensure that they comply with the standards by 1 September 2022. Subsequently, the Agency will verify the compliance of the internal systems of higher education institutions with the standards and their overall effectiveness.

Pursuant to the Act, the Agency is to provide for 13 different types of proceedings in relation to higher education institutions. In 2020, the Agency introduced and implemented the first two types of proceedings related to the evaluation of the elimination of deficiencies in recent accreditations imposed on specific institutions. At present, the introduction and implementation of four other types of proceedings related to the accreditation of individual study programmes or their modifications and proceedings on the Agency's initiative is in progress.

In the second half of 2021, proceedings related to the evaluation of the compliance of higher education systems with the standards will be prepared and implemented, thus completing a substantial part of the initial implementation of evaluations and proceedings following the ESG 2015 and the adopted Act. Systematic mechanisms for monitoring and supervising compliance with standards will be put in place on an ongoing basis.

At present, the Agency focuses on the following activities:

1. In the summer of 2020, the Agency issued accreditation standards and subsequently in the third quarter of 2020 explained their relationship with the ESG 2015 and the provisions of the Act in the form of an online conference, the record of which is available to higher education institutions. The proper understanding of standards is an important condition for their successful implementation in institutions. Therefore, individual and thematic consultations continue to take place with over 300 participants from institutions. The Agency also organizes

professional events on specific topics in cooperation with external partners, such as the Student Council of Higher Education Institutions and the Human Resources Professionals Association.

2. In the first quarter of 2021, the Agency prepared tools for submitting applications for the accreditation of study programmes by institutions in the online environment. The Agency subsequently prepares technical tools for the electronic support of reviewers so that it can handle large numbers of proceedings with severely limited administrative capacity.
3. The Agency has identified the insufficient coverage of several fields of study by reviewers in the list of reviewers and is seeking procedures for the targeted recruitment of reviewers, preferably from abroad.
4. The Agency is searching for opportunities to obtain views on the quality of education from students and is preparing their systematic collection through the student satisfaction survey.
5. The Agency is gradually building the elements of its quality assurance system for its activities to close the system as a functional unit with effective feedback in the short term.
6. The Agency has gradually put in place processes to evaluate how higher education institutions eliminate deficiencies resulting from decisions taken in relation to their previous accreditations, complying with existing study programmes with the standards and modifying accredited new study programmes with the prior consent of the Agency.
7. The Agency is gradually introducing processes by which higher education institutions may request the evaluation of the compliance of the internal system with the standards and the accreditation of habilitation proceedings and inauguration proceedings.
8. The Agency shall put in place processes to evaluate, monitor and supervise the delivery of new study programmes with the standards.

2.2 Priority areas

In the current phase of implementation of the new quality assurance system, the following most important challenges have been identified:

1. Explaining the principles and strengthening the internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic

As the Slovak Republic is in a period of transition to a new quality assurance system, higher education institutions are being forced to streamline their processes. The Agency shall provide the highest possible level of quality and efficiency in guiding higher education institutions. It is, therefore, necessary to take steps to communicate more effectively with institutions and the public.

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

The insufficient level of involvement of stakeholders, especially from the ranks of employers in quality assurance and their readiness for expected activities in this area, was identified as one of the key problem areas. The emphasis will also need to be placed on the involvement of internal stakeholders such as students.

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

The professionalism and transparency of the activities of experts is an important basis for building the Agency's authority. In this area, it is necessary to ensure the selection of experts rather than the recruitment, the quality training of experts (generally and individually focused) ensuring objective evaluation and the coordination of their activities, by establishing an international focus on their acquisition.

4. Ensuring the effective performance of the Agency

The Agency, as a new public-law institution, is creating and implementing its processes for the first time. In order to ensure trust in the Agency, the transparency of its processes, and the effectiveness of its external quality assurance, it is necessary to strengthen its internal processes, and regularly evaluate its strengths and weaknesses and respond to these findings with concrete action.

5. Building confidence

The Slovak Republic ranks worst after Luxembourg in the European Union in terms of brain drain³. The negative media image of the quality of Slovak higher education institutions contributes to this to a large extent. Therefore, the Agency has the potential to help reverse this trend and build confidence in Slovak institutions and the quality assurance system. This can be achieved through the correct establishment and implementation of standards, transparency and education in decision-making on the quality of education.

In order to achieve the results in the above priority areas, the following activity steps, objectives expressed by measurable indicators (desired outcomes), timeline, and responsible actors have been established.

³ OECD: Education at Glance 2020. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/69096873-en.pdf?expires=1620627371&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=0462B472C0BBED39FD21BEA0A80D57F8>

1. Explaining the principles and strengthening the internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic

Priority action	Activity steps	Desired outcome	Timeline, responsible actors
1.1. Provide thematic consultations to higher education institutions on guidelines and interpretation of standards and technical support for the application process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> professional consultations for experts in higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> carrying out at least 6 thematic consultations involving at least 200 participants in the higher education environment in the Slovak Republic 	<p>March 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
1.2. Organize professional events that support higher education institutions in the process of the compliance their internal systems and in the modification of study programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> holding a conference and another event for experts from higher education institutions in the Slovak Republic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> holding 2 professional events per year 	<p>March 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
1.3. Provide an interpretation of the standards in the form of frequently asked questions and answers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> creating an interface on the Agency's website, publication of questions and answers, their continuous replenishment and updating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a functional interface on the Agency's website published questions and answers, continuously updated 	<p>from March 2021 continuously</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
1.4. Ensure uniform interpretation of standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> performing internal seminars or similar events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> performing at least 4 workshop/ seminar events 	<p>March 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
1.5. Financial support for institutions meeting the set conditions in the implementation of the design of an internal quality system for quality assurance in higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> call from the Operational Programme Human Resources to support higher education institution projects for the development of the internal system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> number of supported higher education institutions 	<p>2021 – 2022</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic Publication of the call in June 2021</p>

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

Priority action	Activity steps	Desired outcome	Timeline, responsible actors
2.1. Increase the involvement of employers in the quality assurance system at higher education institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increasing the number of reviewers from the practice registered in the list of reviewers organizing regular meetings (at least twice a year) 	<p>March 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
2.2. Increasing the number of students involved in quality assurance systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> preparation of future student reviewers training of student reviewers raising awareness of the quality assurance system among students communication with students, workshops for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> number of trained student reviewers number of events for students in the field of quality assurance 	<p>March 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
2.3. Carrying out the student satisfaction survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> preparation, carrying out and evaluation of a broader systematic survey of students' views on higher education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> number of students participating in the survey 	<p>March 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>

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

Priority action	Activity steps	Desired outcome	Timeline, responsible actors
3.1. Optimize feedback on the activity of reviewers and propose measures to improve their activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improving tools for providing feedback from reviewers and their activities, evaluating this feedback, and proposing measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> feedback on the Agency's proceedings in 2021 proposal of measures based on this feedback 	<p>until January 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>

3.2. Look for inspiration and experience in quality assurance abroad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exchanging experience and best practices in the area of external quality assurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication with quality assurance agencies abroad 	<p>until March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
3.3. Improve the selection of reviewers for registration in the list of reviewers and the selection of reviewers for the review panel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • active searching for suitable reviewers in the Slovak Republic and abroad, improving internal procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • registration of at least 90 new persons in the list of reviewers without ties to the higher education institutions environment in the Slovak Republic • elaboration of the methodology of internal evaluation for reviewers (their erudition, approach to work ...) 	<p>March 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
3.4. Improve the training of reviewers – optimize the instruction system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • updating the training/instruction module for the training of reviewers with regard to various stakeholders represented in the list of reviewers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • innovated training/instruction module with feedback from reviewers • evaluation of feedback from the reviewers and their satisfaction with the preparation for the evaluation process 	<p>until May 2021</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>

4. Ensuring the effective performance of the Agency

Priority action	Activity steps	Desired outcome	Timeline, responsible actors
4.1. Strengthen the quality of the Agency's institutional capacity to ensure the proceedings and optimize the Agency's organizational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring the professional development of the Agency's staff, stabilizing the Agency's staff structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluation of the professional growth plan of the Agency's staff and proposal measures 	<p>February 2021 – March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
4.2. Extend the Agency's information system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building a module supporting the evaluation of internal quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • functional module of the information system 	<p>until September 2021</p>

	assurance systems of higher education institutions		Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education
4.3. Improve support from expert and analytical activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> preparation of analytical outputs in the context of quality assurance in higher education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> thematic analysis outputs of a pilot survey of student satisfaction 	<p>until March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
4.4. Systematize the Agency's internal quality assurance procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> implementation of the Agency's internal procedures for quality assurance of the Agency's activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> updated internal regulations preparing a preliminary audit of the Agency's procedures 	<p>until March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
4.5. Prepare the Agency for full membership in ENQA and registration in EQAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> carrying out a preliminary audit of the Agency's procedures and elaborating a proposal of measures following the results of this audit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluation of the preliminary audit adoption of a plan of measures 	<p>until March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>

5. Building confidence

Priority action	Activity steps	Desired outcome	Timeline, responsible actors
5.1. Transparent public information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> development of institutional processes for publishing applications and decisions popularizing presentation of quality assurance principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> published applications and decisions 	<p>until March 2022</p> <p>Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>
5.2. Systematic information management and access to study programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> modification and extension of the functionality of the study programmes and study fields register 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> web interface traffic 	<p>until April 2022</p> <p>Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic in cooperation with the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education</p>

3. Conclusion

The action plan is carried out within the international project Supporting European QA Agencies in Meeting the ESG (SEQA-ESG). The Ministry and the Agency participated in the creation of the action plan. The objectives, activities and measures set out in the action plan are based on the conclusions of a meeting with experts from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), on discussions with stakeholders and on comparisons of practices and experience from other countries. In 2021 and 2022, the Ministry, and in particular the Agency, are expected to implement several important measures identified within five areas (for more details, see section 4. Priority Areas of the Action Plan). The Agency commenced its activities in 2019 and is gradually creating and implementing its internal processes as well as the processes for higher education institutions evaluation. Given the current state, the emphasis in the action plan was put mainly on increasing the efficiency of the Agency's activities and on improving the Agency's processes to the level necessary for a functioning external quality assurance system.