

III. NEW ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

AGENCY FOR SCIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNAL QA SYSTEM

Jasmina Havranek

Director, Agency for Science and Higher Education

E-mail: ured@azvo.hr

Vesna Dodiković-Jurković

Deputy Director, Agency for Science and Higher Education

E-mail: vdjurkov@azvo.hr

Emita Blagdan

Assistant for International Cooperation, Agency for Science and Higher Education

E-mail: eblagdan@azvo.hr

Abstract

ASHE is an independent national agency for external evaluation in higher education and science in the Republic of Croatia. It operates in accordance with the international Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Based on the results of external evaluation conducted by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), ASHE became a full member of ENQA, as well as a member of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). ASHE has established a quality system in accordance with ISO 9001 and ESG standards. It supports ASHE's sustainable development, and fulfillment of the adopted mission, policy and strategic goals. The development of business processes is possible only in synergy with continuous and plan-based development of human resources, the most important resource. Feedback on satisfaction of ASHE employees and various stakeholders is analysed and used for improving business processes and the satisfaction of those participating in them. It supports the establishment of the organizational quality culture, which includes self-assessment on both individual and institutional basis, while being open to participation in various external evaluation procedures. The results of evaluation procedures encourage objective consideration of advantages and deficiencies, as well as joint implementation of agreed improvements.

Keywords: international standards, internal quality assurance, higher education.

1. Introduction

The setting up of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is the result of the European-wide Bologna Process for the reform of higher education. Quality assurance has been one of the main pillars of the Bologna Process from the very beginning. Some of the main quality assurance milestones within the Bologna Process are the adoption of a common set of standards for internal and external quality assurance in Europe, namely the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area¹ (ESG) and the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) in 2008. EQAR is managing the register of quality assurance agencies that have demonstrated their compliance with the ESG through an external review. ESG are composed of three parts, addressing internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and the quality assurance of the quality assurance agencies. ESG call for agencies to have internal quality assurance (IQA) procedures in place. These procedures are used to demonstrate to stakeholders that agencies are dedicated to improving their own performance.

2. Setting up a national QA agency in Croatia

Pursuant to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education² (2006/143/EC), a system of internal and external QA in higher education was established in the Republic of Croatia, in line with ESG.

The Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) was established in 2005 as the only national agency for external quality assurance in higher education. The Agency was a new institution in the system of higher education and science, and had yet to build its reputation and gain the trust of stakeholders for its independent work and credibility. The Agency's management faced a number of challenges at that time; new employees needed to be recruited and quality work processes established. At that time, there were no study programmes at the national level on QA in higher education, or, for that matter, the management and leadership in higher education. This meant that a continuous and planned investment in human resources development was needed.

In 2006, ASHE Management Board adopted a decision on the establishment of internal quality management system in line with ISO 9001³. This was the first step towards a systematic internal quality assurance.

One of the strategic decisions at that time was to join international associations like *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)* and *International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)*. This served as an incentive to meet international standards for QA agencies, cooperate with foreign agencies, learn from the experiences of others, and develop own QA processes in the national context, by applying good practice.

In order to stimulate a structured capacity building of employees, the Agency made use of the INQAAHE QA Graduate Programme, organising in-house seminars and jointly going through all the thematic units of the INQAAHE programme. We have learned together, at the same time establishing and developing ASHE processes and IQA system.

The reforms brought about by the Bologna process resulted in new legislation, the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Official Gazette 45/09), which re-defined the organisational structure and scope of work of ASHE.

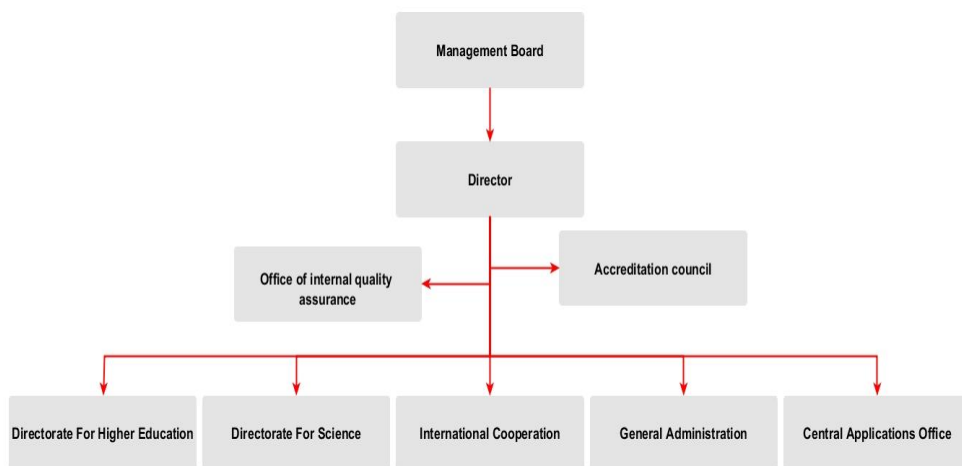


Figure 1. ASHE organisational chart

ASHE is governed by the Management Board of 9 members, who are appointed or dismissed by the Croatian Parliament. The Management Board appoints the Director of the Agency and, among other things, adopts strategic documents, annual reports and financial reports.

The Director of the Agency represents the Agency, manages it on a daily basis and takes care of its sustainable development.

The Accreditation Council is ASHE's expert body, comprising 11 members appointed for a four-year term by the ASHE Management Board, at the recommendation of the Director. The Accreditation Council is responsible for adopting criteria and procedures for external evaluations, adopting annual plans of external evaluation, appointing reviewers/panel members, reviewing and adopting their evaluation reports, and issuing decisions on the basis of these reports.

The main scope of ASHE's work is external quality assurance in higher education and science; all related activities are the responsibility of ASHE's Directorate for Higher Education and the Directorate for Science, who work closely with the Accreditation Council. ASHE also comprises the national ENIC/NARIC Office, which carries out the procedure of professional recognition of foreign higher education qualifications, as well as the Central Applications Office (CAO), the national centre for applications to study programmes, i.e. higher education institutions in Croatia. ASHE also provides expert and administrative support to the work of various national bodies, such as the National Council for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development (a strategic body in charge of the development of the system of science and higher education), and the Committee for Ethics in Science and Higher Education. Trainings the Agency provides to various groups of stakeholders in the system of science and higher education are also an important part of our activities.

An integral part of ASHE is also the Office for Internal Quality Assurance. The purpose of the Internal Quality Assurance Office is to ensure the implementation of the ESG and ISO 9001 standards through effective and development-oriented integrated IQA systems that stimulates mutual inspiration, capacity building in terms of IQA, sharing of experiences and good practices. Our experience in setting and developing IQA system taught us that having procedures on paper is one thing, while a successful implementation of procedural improvements in agency is the real challenge.

3. The development of an integrated quality system

A decision of ASHE Management Board to establish IQA system in line with ISO 9001 was the first step towards a systematic internal quality assurance.

With the adoption of the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education in 2009, ASHE became the only national body responsible for carrying out external evaluation in higher education and science. New legislation prompted changes to the internal organisation and encouraged further specialisation of Agency staff in external quality assurance. This served as an additional incentive for the development of an integrated quality system, in line with both ESG and ISO 9001. A special attention is paid to the continuous professional development and training of ASHE employees, including study visits to other quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, and participation in conferences and seminars.

Institutional and individual development continued through the implementation of ISO 9001, training of ISO internal and lead auditors within Agency staff, organising workshops and seminars on the importance of communication, self-evaluation and continuous improvement and innovation, as a way of encouraging inter-departmental communication and methods of collecting feedback from clients, stakeholders, and employees. Since the very beginning, information on staff satisfaction has been systematically collected at ASHE, also via the annual satisfaction survey. With the changing organisational and individual needs, the number of survey questions has been increased over the years.

Figure 2 shows the data on ASHE staff satisfaction from 2006-2017.

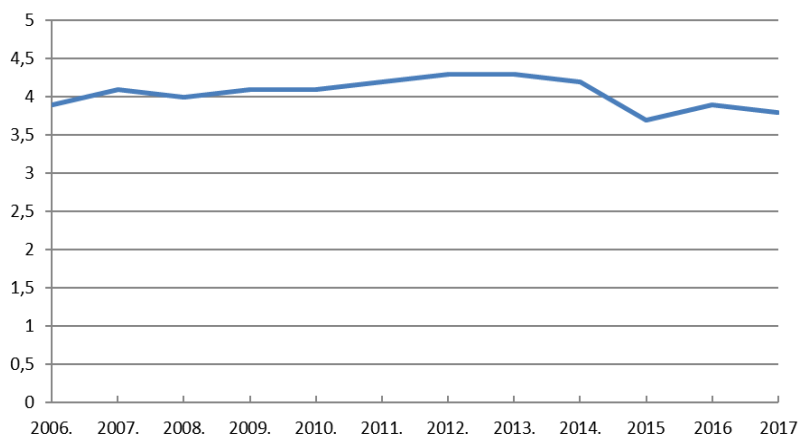


Figure 2. ASHE staff satisfaction based on Staff satisfaction survey from 2006-2017

A host of data on the quality of ASHE processes and services was collected through surveys or e-mails, though organised discussions, round tables, meetings or various projects, whereby the professionalism, efficiency, good cooperation, accuracy and a very good organizational skills of ASHE staff was frequently emphasised. The collected information is analysed, and based on the results, a quality index is calculated. Trends are annually monitored and discussed at the level of departments, the Agency, the Management Board and the Accreditation Council.

The provided feedback helps to objectively and reliably identify institutional strengths and good practices, but also areas where improvements are needed. Based on this information, the Agency develops action plans for a systematic improvement and development.

Figure 3 shows data on client satisfaction with ASHE services, by individual departments.

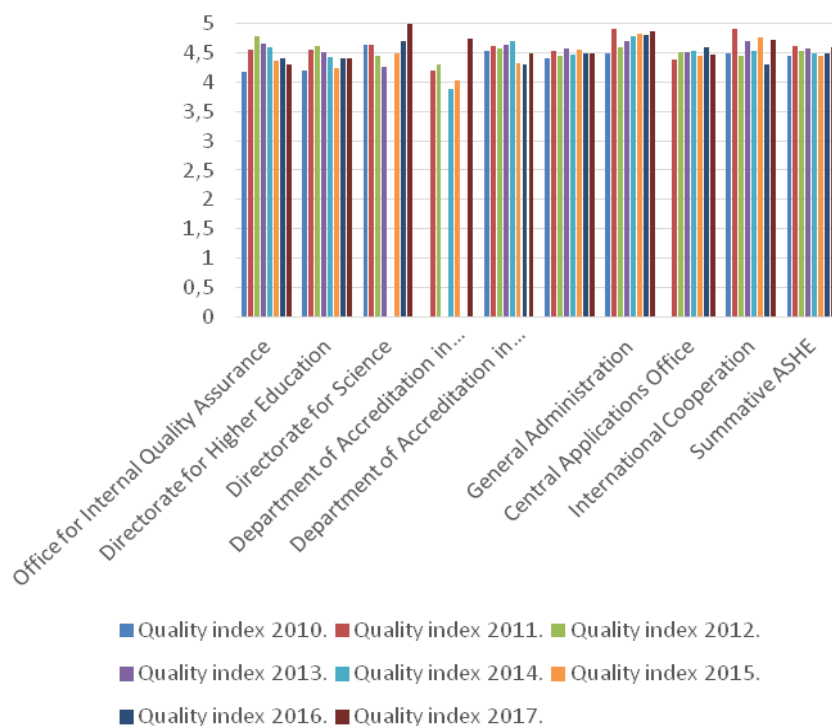


Figure 3. Client satisfaction with ASHE services from 2010-2017

The necessary adjustment to the new ISO 9001:2015 standard served as an incentive to introduce risk management. These developments stimulated discussion on intended quality goals, defining indicators and achieving defined end results, as well as defining risks and taking appropriate steps to avoid, accept, mitigate or transfer the risks.

ASHE participated in the work of ENQA Staff Development Group, which produced a unique competencies framework for QA professionals working in all ENQA member agencies. The agencies can use this framework in designing job descriptions, staff recruitment and further development of employees. The document defines competencies for both staff that is new to this sector and experienced professionals, including and a wide range of activities that can be used by the agencies in staff development (guidelines for all key points for professional QA staff management and development - defining the job, recruitment and selection, induction of employees, professional development, and performance review). (Source: ASHE 2016 Annual report⁴).

The continuity of investment in human resources and professional growth and development of every employee is reflected in ASHE's participation in MAMFORCE project "Towards the real equality between men and women - harmonising work and private life", under the auspices of the Office of Ombudsperson for Gender Equality of the Republic of Croatia, and in cooperation with Mamforce Association.

MAMFORCE © Standard is awarded to organisations that recognize the needs of their employees and manage to adequately organise their work and working environment, while respecting the principles of the balanced professional and private life, and opportunities for equal growth and development of every employee.

In order to review ASHE's status in relation to the relevant areas for meeting conditions for obtaining the MAMFORCE© Standard, the evaluation process was based on an audit procedure that encompassed the following areas: satisfaction and engagement, organization of

work/responsible management, culture of support and flexibility, family responsibilities, leadership and development, and talent management.

The audit resulted in a report that, along with the review of the situation, contained recommendations for improvements within each of the evaluated areas. The results were presented to ASHE as the first public-sector organization that exercised the right to use the status of BASIC MAMFORCE© Standard until September 2017. The Agency prepared a one-year action plan for the implementation of planned activities aimed at further improvement of working conditions and balance between private and professional life. The improvements carried out within 12 months were evaluated during the new audit, and ASHE gained the right to use CHANGE MAMFORCE standard.

4. Compliance with the ESG, Part III

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

All ASHE activities are carried out in line with the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education. As already stated, ASHE mission is to promote the importance of quality assurance in higher education and science. An essential part of fulfilling the mission is a regular implementation of external evaluation procedures compliant with ESG, Part II. ASHE bodies comprise representatives of all stakeholders in higher education and science, including students. The international dimension has been provided by the membership of Croatian academics permanently employed abroad, and by participation of international experts in peer panels.

ESG 3.2 Official status

ASHE was established by the Croatian Government Decree in 2005 and its role as the only national body in charge of carrying out external evaluation of quality assurance procedures in science and higher education was re-defined in the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education. The Accreditation Council adopts an accreditation recommendation based on the opinion of its expert body, upon which the Ministry issues a final decision. In audit, the final decision rests with the ASHE Accreditation Council.

ESG 3.3 Independence

The Agency's organisational independence was defined in the Act on Quality Assurance.

Operational independence is ensured by the independence of the Agency's bodies and by the independence of expert panel members. Expert panels regularly include foreign experts, which prevents potential influence of various interest groups within a small Croatian academic community. Members of expert panels produce a final report and pass a quality grade, but can also submit a separate evaluation report. The final decision rests with the Accreditation Council, based on the submitted expert panel report. All decisions are passed by the Accreditation Council by a two-third majority. The Agency's independence is also secured by funding from the state budget combined with the EU funds, in order to maintain financial stability.

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis

The Agency has a special research office that conducts annual analyses and publishes conclusions of conducted evaluation procedures.

ASHE also compares data and information collected in external evaluation procedures with the data and information from other sources, to provide insight into certain aspects of Croatian higher education. These findings are presented at conferences and published on ASHE website in the form of analyses.

ESG 3.5 Resources

ASHE annual budget is a part of the state budget allocated to the Ministry. State budget is adopted by the Parliament upon the Government proposal.

Regarding the IT infrastructure, ASHE employs a range of information tools and systems for data collecting and processing. Some of these tools are national information system, and some are owned and maintained by ASHE.

The most important investments made by the Agency are those in human resources. Agency spends a lot of resources on international expert panels; in addition to fees, ASHE also covers their travelling and accommodation costs.

ASHE employees work by following and applying the latest trends in quality assurance and undergoing appropriate professional training.

ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

ASHE's system of internal quality assurance is based on the legal framework regulating ethical conduct in the academic community and professional conduct and integrity of employees in the public sector, as well as the ESG and the ISO 9001. It is based on the Quality Policy and related documents, and involves regular collection of feedback from all ASHE staff, everyone involved in external quality assurance procedures, and all stakeholders. Methods of collecting feedback are direct – through surveys, written correspondence and meetings, and indirect – through analysis of press clippings and regular cooperation with the academic community in various bodies, workshops and enhancement-oriented projects.

ESG 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies

ASHE underwent the first international review of compliance with ESG in 2011. In line with its obligation to undergo cyclical external review in a five-year period, ASHE initiated a new process of external review conducted by ENQA in 2015, for the purpose of securing full membership in ENQA and registration into EQAR, which was done in 2017.

5. Conclusion

Last year, the Agency underwent the following external evaluation procedures. The international accreditation carried out by ENQA confirmed the Agency's compliance with the ESG and resulted in the renewal of membership in ENQA and EQAR. The expert panel commended the Agency for the quality of staff, their contribution and sound knowledge of national and international quality assurance practices. ENQA also commended good cooperation with various stakeholders involved in ASHE's activities, and participation of foreign experts in various procedures. The example of good practice cited by ENQA is the role of coordinators – employees of the Agency assisting experts in interpreting various criteria and in charge of reporting consistency.

External evaluation was also carried out in accordance with ISO 9001 and the ASHE's quality assurance system was assessed as efficient, while meeting the conditions for transition to the requirements of ISO 9001:2015.

In order to emphasize its commitment to the welfare and needs of its employees, the Agency went through another independent review of the working conditions and human resource management practices, and was awarded the CHANGE MAMFORCE STANDARD.

The Croatian Society for Quality charters awarded in 2014 and 2017 for ASHE's special contribution to education and promotion of quality (for organization) are another indicator of ASHE's contribution to the development and promotion of the quality culture in science and higher education, and the broader community.

These evaluations contributed to the Agency's good reputation and recognisability, started further improvements through the internal quality assurance system and confirmed ASHE's significant role in quality assurance in higher education.

References

6. Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015) Brussels, Belgium;
7. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (2006/143/EC), Official Journal of the European Union, L 64/60, 2006;
8. HRN EN ISO 9001:2015, Croatian Standards Institute, 2016;
9. ASHE 2016 Annual report.