CEENQA | CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN NETWORK
OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

# PEOPLE AND CULTURE IN QA AGENCIES

## PROCEEDINGS OF A WORKSHOP ORGANISED BY CEENQA ON 2 JUNE 2023

Sketch: Benjamin Muhamedbegović

# FOREWORD

It is our great pleasure to greet you in the foreword to this year's edition of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (CEENQA) publication, which explores the experiences and practices of CEENQA member agencies. The topic of this year's edition, People and Culture in Quality Assurance Agencies, was also the topic of the workshop held in Astana, Kazakhstan in June 2023. Both the workshop and the subsequent annual General Assembly were kindly hosted by the Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR) of Kazakhstan. We are very pleased that, following a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and a successful CEENQA General Assembly held in person last year in Istanbul, we have again had the opportunity to meet and continue to collaborate in person.

By now it has become a tradition that the General Assembly is accompanied by a workshop which allows the participants to exchange experiences on a range of topics of relevance in the area of quality assurance in higher education. This year, the discussion centred around the topic People and Culture in Quality Assurance Agencies, which was an initiative of the Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education. The topic takes a closer look at human resources management from the perspective of quality assurance agencies. The discussion encompassed a range of themes dealing with investment in human resources, from strategic issues to the implementation of good practice in an attempt to create a pleasant and productive work environment.

Quality assurance agencies operate in a dynamic environment which is undergoing constant change. The challenges brought about by demographic, technological, economic, political and sociological changes, as well as changes in health and climate, require rapid solutions which enable necessary transformations and the creation of an environment which facilitates the agencies' sustainable development. It is a challenge to respond successfully to change, to maintain stability, to foster employee welfare and satisfaction, and to realise one's mission and business aims, all the while developing a culture that will safeguard the core values of the organisation. We are witnessing rapid technological advancements which are introducing changes into our business processes and accordingly require certain adaptations. We are also increasingly facing the internationalisation of our activities, which is opening up new business aspects.

In order to respond to specific challenges with which they are faced, quality assurance agencies must create a stimulating work environment where employees will be able to develop their competencies and build successful careers in accordance with their needs.

In accordance with the ESG, quality assurance agencies operating within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are expected to provide the necessary material, financial and human resources. Human resources have been singled out as the most important of these. In our dynamic times, we are facing rapid changes in labour market requirements – some jobs are no longer needed, while new jobs and positions are opening up. An important priority of quality assurance agencies is to ensure employee access to appropriate education and training opportunities so that they may complete their daily tasks successfully and efficiently, meet their own work-related goals and contribute to the realisation of agency goals. The specifics of competency profiles of QA professionals in the EHEA are defined by the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) Professional Competencies Framework. Their use in practice has contributed to the recognition of specific features of jobs and positions in quality assurance agencies, as well as to understanding the competency profiles of QA professionals.

This publication includes contributions from all four speakers of the workshop in Astana, in the form of an article and two in the form of a short overview of presented practices during the panel discussion titled The Impact of Digitalisation on the HR Practices of QA Agencies.

The contributions cover different aspects of human resources management in quality assurance agencies, from a wider global perspective focused on developing a quality culture based on promoting the core values of higher education, a broader perspective of important stakeholders in EHEA and the presentation of specific aspects and experiences of QA agencies.

We believe that this publication will help many CEENQA members reflect in greater depth on the various aspects of HR management, as well as inspire you to engage in an exchange of good practice with colleagues and enhance HR management policies and practices in your home agencies.
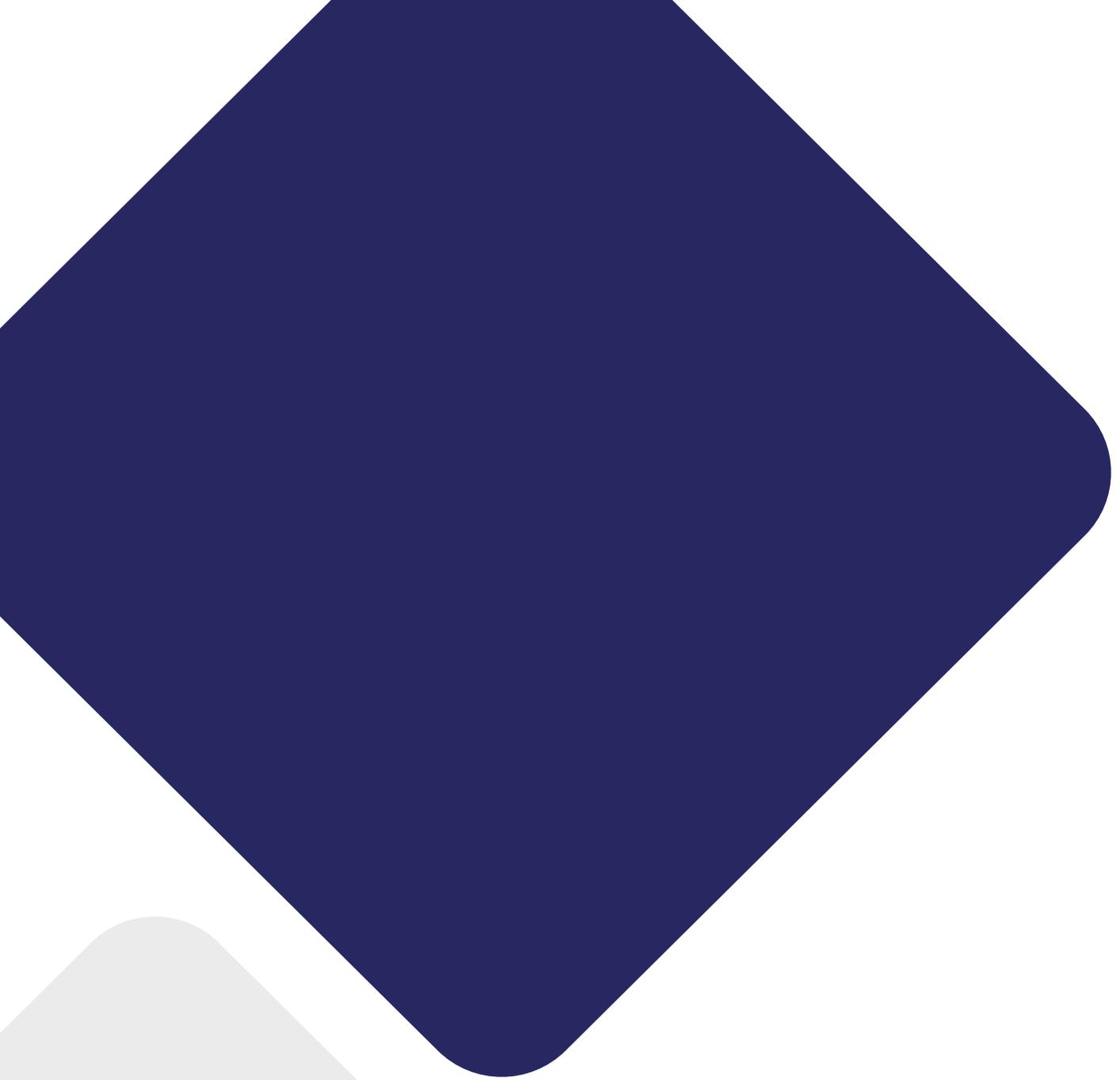
Enjoy your reading.

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**SUSANNA KARAKHANYAN, 7TH PRESIDENT OF INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION (INQAHEE)**

## INTRODUCTION

Let us be honest, few would disagree that the majority of us live with a constant worry deep in our hearts regarding the environment we live in, full of political and military tensions, global pandemic and societal issues, to name but a few. Every day we wake up to news and grow increasingly convinced of the shaken premises of democracy around the globe, the increasing prevalence of authoritarian power with deeply rooted corruption, natural calamities, constant lies and falsifications of facts and history. As per UNESCO data around 56 countries were in armed conflict in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022). Truly, it is becoming increasingly challenging to understand and interpret the root causes of all the injustice that surrounds us, let alone snowballing, flawed human interactions. Is this a coincidence? Or has it all matured to the extent that we experience "turbulences" every day? Could it be that we as educationalists, or generations of educationalists before us, have erred at some point in setting proper premises for education supported by democratic values? We all know the impact of education is long term and we all agree it is tangible.

A common belief regarding higher education's core role and functions is that of societal impact and transformation power. Nonetheless, if we look back at what we as educationalists actually do, we find ourselves facing a predominance of theoretical teaching, less of application, a growing disconnect from real life, and a deepening and progressive drift away from the core values crucial for sustainable success in academic, social, ecological, and humanistic matters.

This article dwells on the core values of higher education and explores potential ways for an external quality assurance body to pursue the core values of higher education by instilling them in people and organizational cultures, thus having a transformative impact on higher education and society at large.

## CORE VALUES OF HIGHER EDUCATION: WHICH ARE THEY? DO WE PRACTISE WHAT WE PREACH?

> *"Measurement is the first step that leads to control and eventually to improvement. If you can't measure something, you can't understand it. If you can't understand it, you can't control it. If you can't control it, you can't improve it."*
>
> — H. James Harrington

If something merits our attention for change and impact, it surely merits a clear definition linked to adequate measurement – this is a common practice within the quality assurance community, which requires setting clarity in terms of definitions and policies, hence enabling implementation and measurability of the ultimate impact. Then, a legitimate question is how this principle of measurability works with the core values of higher education that matter for effective higher education performance and society at large. To start with, how do we define the core values of higher education? Is there a common understanding around those values?

A glimpse at the current documents and literature predominantly draws attention to the 1988 Magna Charta Universitatum (1988) originally signed by 388 rectors on the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, which listed the fundamental values of the university tradition: autonomy, academic freedom, a space of tolerance and protection by governments. Signed in 1988, the Magna Charta was supported globally by 2020. In 2022, 58 rectors signed a new, 2020 version of the Magna Charta Universitatum in Bologna, Italy, which marks the international recognition that university responsibilities towards *transforming society* have become as important as upholding academic *freedom* and *autonomy*. A very far-sighted and plausible move, yet very demanding.

Further, the Paris Communiqué (2018) lists four fundamental values of higher education in Europe: institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education. It specifies a key role for quality assurance as promoting and protecting *the shared fundamental values in the entire EHEA through intensified political dialogue and cooperation* as the necessary basis for *quality learning, teaching and research* as well as for *democratic societies.* Yet, it is the 2024 Tirana Communiqué that is set to define all the fundamental values.

Next, while no specific definition of core values for higher education has been given by UNESCO, which is the only UN structure with a mandate in HE, values such as respect, empathy, equality, and solidarity are defined as being core to the mission of universities, colleges, and technical institutes in the future. In the report on futures of education (2021) the following are defined as expectations from HE:
- Higher education must foster ethics and support students to be better and more capable citizens with greater awareness of their civic and environmental responsibilities.
- Higher education must also be socio-culturally relevant.
- Appreciation of cultural diversity, a commitment to defend human rights, and intolerance for racism, sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, and discrimination in all forms must be key educational objectives.
- It is ever evolving in its content as it empowers individuals to become better versions of themselves, to take strong value systems forward, and to *transform* their environments.

As UNESCO Assistant Director General, Ms. Stefania Giannini, has emphasized in the WHEC Roadmap 2030 (UNESCO, 2022), higher education (HE) has a strategic and irreplaceable role to play in building more sustainable, resilient, and peaceful societies, and in reinventing HE as a basis for building a safe, more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

Further exploration of HE values brings the following summary from Scholars at Risk informed by international human rights law, UNESCO instruments, and related civil society statements, which collectively identify five core values: *equitable access, accountability, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and social responsibility* (SAR, 2020). Indeed, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility are woven into the fabric of quality assurance and its vision (Eaton, 2021). While there seems to be gradually growing convergence around the core values of higher education, the question that merits an in-depth exploration is whether those values are considered in our daily lives, cared about, or respected at all.

A quick search on the University World News website reveals ample incidences of infringing the core values of higher education globally, namely academic freedom – 2,194 articles since the end of 2007 – and a Google search reveals trillions.

How did we end up being so distanced from the core that matters, the core we all are called upon to serve and the core that ensures safety and security for all of us?

Indeed, it turns out we talk more and do less. Or we do lots of things in such isolation that the outcomes have insignificant impact on what does matter.

The INQAAHE Global Study (Karakhanyan&Stensaker, 2020) looks at the last three decades of quality assurance practices and their massification globally. One of the key findings questions the relevance of the accreditation and quality assurance standards applied by diverse systems to specific needs, contexts and cultures. Further, a CEU study on the relationship between the Fundamental Values of Higher Education and Quality Assurance (2021), commissioned by the Council of Europe revealed that while the fundamental values of HE were defined at the QA agency level and in the regulatory provisions for quality assurance, no action has been taken so far to define, measure and act on putting those values into practice.

**DRIVING BEHAVIOUR THROUGH VALUE SATISFACTION**

If the core values of higher education are to be put into practice and have a transformative impact on society at large, serious measures need to be taken to make that happen at the level of individuals – the change agents. If QA staff and experts do not live by the values we preach, it will be impossible to adequately convey those values with the impact that we all expect.

UPenn's famous Professor Dwyer's value satisfaction theory (Dwyer, 2000) becomes extremely relevant in this case as it eloquently runs as follows: *never expect anyone to engage in a behavior that serves your values unless you give them adequate reasons to do so.* A very simple statement, yet with profound meaning and implications.

Dwyer specifies five steps to influence people's behaviour by understanding the values people cherish, since values drive behaviour through perceptions. By understanding values, one, first of all, gains a significant advantage in managing people and cultures by being better positioned (1) to understand the capacity of change agents to do what is required. It empowers the leader (2) to design a reward system that satisfies the values of the change agents. Next, setting a working reward system underpinned by special arrangements that (3) guarantee the reward, becomes a crucial step to success, since, unless one practises what is preached, no tangible change in behaviour can be expected. Finally, it is crucial to make people feel safe in a changing context by (4) reducing their costs and (5) reducing risks for them. This is not to be confused with a Machiavellian tool for manipulating people or causing them harm. Rather, the theory can be used to get someone to accept your reasonable offer that will actually serve them well. By applying the value system theory to EQA staff and external reviewer capacity building, we actually invest in human resources that matter most for the success of the organizational mission at large.

**A VALUE SYSTEM FOR EQAP CAPACITY BUILDING**

Now, with all the rationalization above, how can we ensure quality assurance staff and reviewers live by the values, convey the values into the setting they impact and hence have a transformative power on education systems and society at large? Of course, we cannot expect it to be an overnight process. It might take a couple of generations to yield the expected outcomes in terms of long-term transformations, but, at least, we as the current generation of educationalists will not be blamed for the opportunities missed by future generations of educationalists.

Some tangible solutions are already available from the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) in the form of a re-engineered approach to setting quality standards and guidelines for external quality assurance providers, which are based on the concept of embedding core values into the essence of QA (INQAAHE, 2022).

Built on a robust methodology culminating in a wide stakeholder consultation, the standards provide enhancement guidance for diverse types of quality assurance provisions and providers, including managing people and cultures.

Further, core values for quality assurance folks can be considered in terms of three main dimensions: personal (understanding the self), professional (practising what we preach), and leadership (leading by influencing constructive behaviour through deep learning into values). The key to success in this model is that it works only when the three dimensions work in concord, coherence and consistency. Let us briefly go through them one by one:

**Personal:** we have to ensure people care, and they only care about those things that are important to them. Incidentally, this is the most crucial and most unexplored/neglected aspect of organizational performance. Hence, we need to understand which values drive their behaviour and they could be many different kinds. For some it could be appreciation, recognition or rewards, while for others it could be power and visibility, and yet others immortality, respect and support. All we need to do is to understand them and come up with the core that all would share.

**Professional:** setting professional core values for the organization also means building on the capacity to live by them. This is one of the most challenging dimensions, which requires, in the first place, a clear definition for each and every value we adopt. While terms could be understood in general, they become alive only after you have defined them for your organization and set clear implementation and achievement measurement guidelines. For HE quality assurance some of the core professional values could be equitable access, accountability, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, social responsibility, or integrity.

**Leadership:** last but not least are the values people leaders should live by. Although staff and external reviewers matter a lot, leadership matters most. Namely, the leadership style that underpins wide-ranging, long-term, and beneficial effects on people's performance by investing in human capital through impactful/meaningful professional development; fostering a productive and employee-focused workplace by understanding the values that drive behaviour & quality culture in the organization; and making sure each and every individual is appropriately compensated, rewarded, and held accountable.

Hence, the logical questions we as QA leaders should continually keep asking could be as follows:

For EQA performance:
- What are the core values your EQA body abides by?
- What are the values your people cherish?
- How do you measure achievement?
- How do you measure impact?

For HE system performance:
- What are the core values your HE abides by?
- What are the values your people cherish?
- How do you measure achievement?
- How do you measure impact?

And beyond this, how do we, as people leaders, deal with our staff and reviewers?

**SUMMARY**

If higher education is to fulfil its social responsibility role, some tangible changes need to happen both at the regulatory and procedural level, as well as at the level of people and culture. At the regulatory level, a clear definition of the core values of higher education should be set,

supported by robust procedures ensuring implementation and measurement of achievement and impact. For this to succeed, key factors revolve around people and a conducive culture, which need to become a priority on the agenda of HEI and QA bodies. Three key sets of values – personal, professional, and leadership – should work in concord and should complement and supplement each other. Coupled with a robust professionalization system, measurement of achievements and accountability mechanisms, the proposed model can have wide-ranging, long-term, and beneficial effects on people performance and culture. Paramount for success here is the leader's capacity to build a strong human capital by driving the behaviour of change agents in a way that enables putting into practice the core values of HE, measurement of achievements, and hence transformation of education and society at large.

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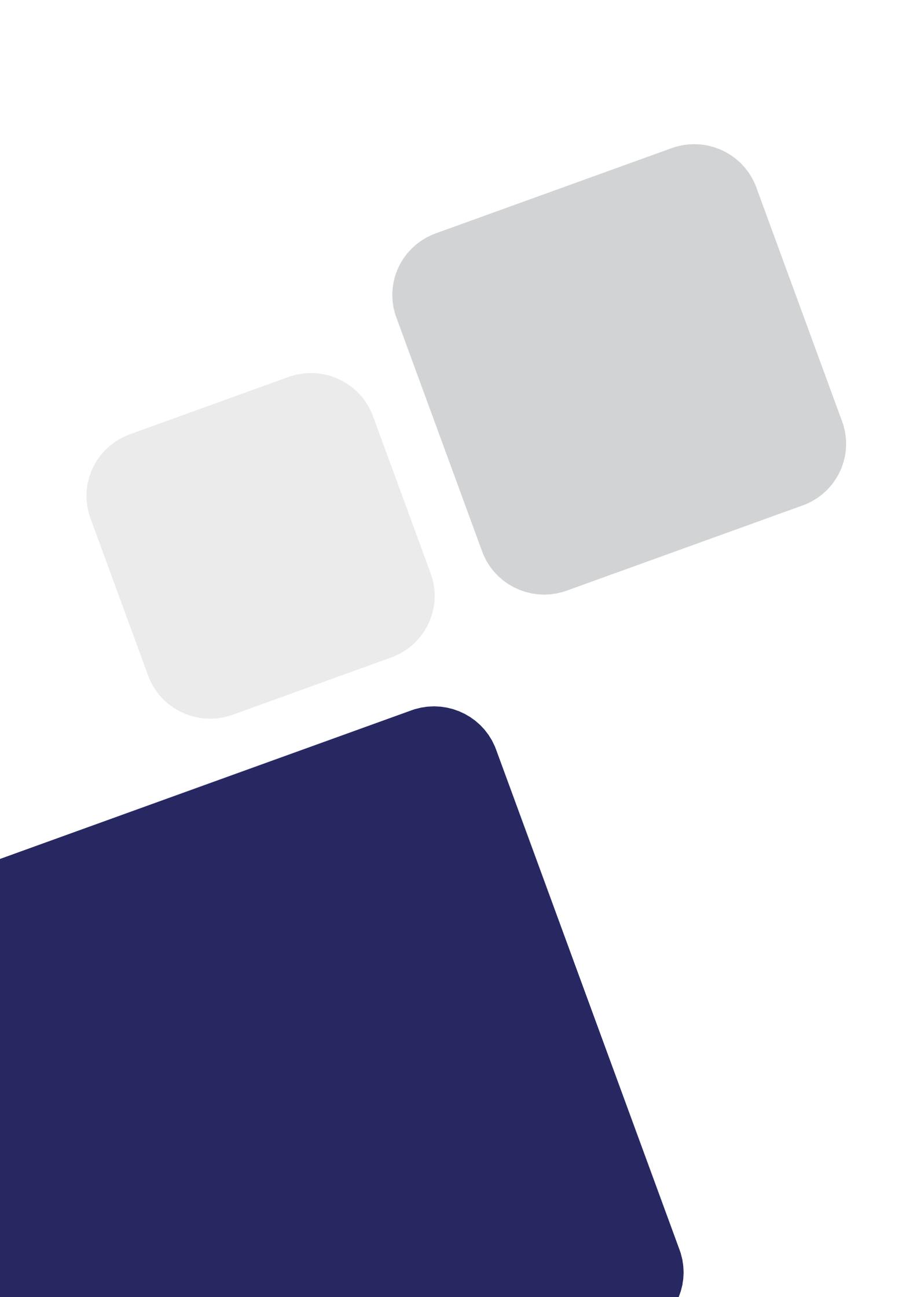
# QA PERSPECTIVES, HUMAN RESOURCES AND THE ESG

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## INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance agencies in Europe play a critical role in upholding academic excellence and accountability within higher education. Maintaining rigorous standards while respecting the diversity of educational systems across Europe can be a complex task. The EQAR knowledge base[1] and the Database of External Quality Assurance Results[2] show a high diversity of the external quality assurance offering. The portfolio of these agencies includes over 300 forms of external QA activities, comprising all kinds of evaluations, accreditations, certification, assessments, audits, and reviews within the scope of the ESG included in the agencies' list of activities. There are around 150 forms of external QA at the institutional level, around 160 forms of external QA at programme level, and 30 different joint programme accreditations and evaluations. Less common (around 12 types) is a combination of institutional and programme external QA activities carried out jointly. Overall, this picture suggests that the evaluation procedures of quality assurance agencies aligned with the ESG, and by extension the quality assurance systems within which they operate, are extremely diversified.

In ensuring consistent and robust evaluations and promoting continuous improvement, one of the fundamental hurdles that European quality assurance agencies face is the question of adequate resources. Operating in a dynamic and diverse educational landscape requires substantial human and financial investment. Many agencies struggle to attract and retain highly qualified professionals who possess the necessary expertise in various academic disciplines. Limited budgets and funding constraints often hinder their ability to recruit and retain the best talents.

By drawing on decisions published on EQAR's website and the review reports of quality assurance agencies, we can observe the continuous efforts of agencies in aligning their practices with the standards of quality assurance in higher education.

## OVERVIEW OF ESG COMPLIANCE

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) provide a common framework for quality assurance, developed by key stakeholders in higher education under the mandate of responsible ministers. These standards refer to internal quality assurance (ESG Part 1), external quality assurance (ESG Part 2), and external quality assurance agencies (ESG Part 3). They offer guidance to higher education institutions in developing their own quality assurance systems and serve as a reference framework for external quality assurance. Agencies further specify and operationalise these standards through the development of their procedures and criteria. Within the ESG, human resources are primarily addressed in standard 3.5 Resources, while standards like ESG 3.6 and ESG 2.1 consider aspects related to the effectiveness of internal quality assurance (of both the agency and the reviewed higher education institution).

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1   https://www.eqar.eu/kb/country-information/

2   http://www.deqar.eu/

Compliance with these standards by quality assurance agencies is assessed through external reviews and their applications to the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The information on the Register provides a clear overview of compliance decisions for each individual standard in ESG Part 2 and Part 3, offering valuable insights into agencies' adherence to these.
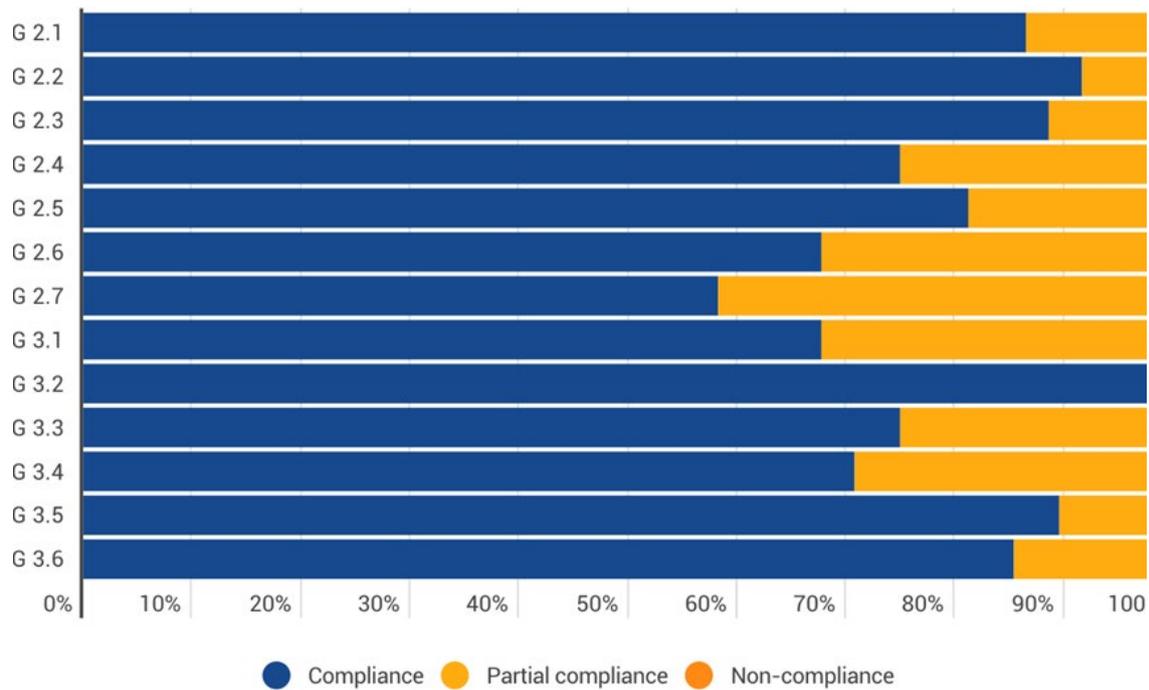


*Figure 1. ESG compliance level achieved by applicant agencies (successful and unsuccessful), data based on applications considered up until 2 November 2023[3]*

## ESG 3.5. RESOURCES

Standard 3.5 considers the adequacy and appropriateness of human and financial resources within quality assurance agencies. It underscores the importance of having the necessary resources to carry out external quality assurance work effectively, to ensure the resources are sustainable and that the agency can access and deploy such resources in a successful way. In its review of 96 applications (as of November 2023), the EQAR's Register Committee found that 89,5% quality assurance agencies achieved compliance with this standard. Where compliance was not ensured, agencies struggled due to limited human and financial resources, high staff turnover, insufficient capacity to perform thematic analyses, high financial dependence on the Ministry, as well as a limited capacity to assure their self-sustainability and to sustain the agency's efforts in meeting its strategic goals.

The operational model for a large number of national and regional QA agencies can be limited due to strict financial regulations, i.e., a funding model based on a multiannual funding system may limit the agency's ability to devise long-term plans; staff recruitment and hiring procedures may be hindered by additional governmental approval set for civil servants; the agency relies on office spaces and equipment overseen by governmental contracts, and the like.

External review reports also discuss concerns related to high staff turnover, a lack of staff training plans or the ad-hoc nature of professional development activities. As part of the suggestions for further improvement and fostering staff retention, panels recommend enhancing staff

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3   https://www.eqar.eu/register/analysis-of-register-committee-decisions/

competence and skills, ensuring clear development plans as part of the agency's long-term strategy, and making use of various staff mobility, peer learning and training opportunities to support the future work and activities of the agency.

In addressing issues related to a limited budget, review panels recommend exploring the possibility of diversifying the agency's funding revenues, considering international funding opportunities for transnational projects as well as possible partnerships and collaboration with other agencies or organisations.

## ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

In meeting compliance with the standard, agencies have to show that their internal QA system guarantees the quality and integrity of their activities and that they translate this into the work they perform. The internal QA system is expected to be designed in such a way that it supports the successful implementation of the agency's activities. In considering the compliance with this standard, 85% of applications have been found to be compliant by the EQAR Register Committee.

For the remaining agencies, the main struggles were related to ensuring an effective internal QA system. The review panels' analysis revealed, e.g., inconsistencies and duplication within and between agency procedures, outdated aspects within agency guidelines and methodologies, a failing of the Plan-Do-Check-Act system, lack of formal mechanisms and corrective measures to act upon external and internal feedback, lack of a systematised approach to continuous improvement, and the like.

Where the panel saw insufficient evidence of improvement in the internal quality assurance of the agency, recommendations were made to, e.g., consider the integration of a systematic feedback mechanism, engagement of all staff in strategic development and monitoring processes, support for improvement-oriented feedback on agency's activities, better integration of feedback loops and monitoring stages, and so on.

## ESG PART 1: STANDARDS FOR INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Another area of concern for European quality assurance agencies lies in the realm of internal quality assurance processes of higher education institutions. Agencies adapt the ESG to their specific local context, either by directly adopting the guidelines if they align well or by making necessary edits, guided by the local framework. In articulating standards for internal QA (considered by quality assurance agencies as part of standard 2.1), variations range from principle-based to very prescriptive. They often include detailed operational or quantitative requirements, which tend to be less flexible, but may be also more generic, depending on the type of procedure and approach.

In addressing aspects related to human resources of higher education institutions, agencies incorporate the standards of ESG Part 1 related (but not limited) to the teaching staff (ESG 1.5) and institutional policies for quality assurance (ESG 1.1). Agencies' reports thus reflect on whether institutions apply transparent processes to staff recruitment and development, whether they assure themselves of the competence of their teachers (ESG 1.5) as well as whether they ensure quality policies as part of their strategic management (ESG 1.1).

Considering overall compliance with standards 1.1 to 1.10 (covered as part of ESG 2.1), 86% of applications have achieved compliance. While agencies generally ensure that all standards of ESG Part 1 are covered, the analysis of review panels also revealed that some standards may be less in focus, may not be consistently covered or may be missing for some specific activities, i.e., international programme accreditation.

Review panels recommend a systematic approach in agency approach to standard development, paying particular attention that all standards of ESG part 1 are checked within the agency's external quality assurance activities so as to avoid structural and systemic deficiency in addressing ESG Part 1.

## HUMAN RESSOURCES IN THE NEW ERA OF QUALITY

Evolving policy challenges, unpredictable crises, and advancements in technology require continuous acquisition of new skills and competencies by public servants. Regulatory bodies and quality assurance agencies are challenged to deliver their mandate in the face of rapid change and continuing uncertainty while ensuring that quality and standards are being assured.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated demands for flexible working arrangements, with adjustments made to working hours and/or place of work. Beyond emergency situations, public administrations are now actively integrating these arrangements as valuable tools to boost productivity, foster employee engagement, and attract and retain a diverse workforce in the public sector.

Further changes in professional practices are expected due to digitalisation tools and artificial intelligence. Many quality assurance agencies have embraced technology to streamline their processes, using automated systems for data collection, analysis, and reporting (which they are now successfully using to upload reports to DEQAR). Effective and comprehensive digital learning or training systems are becoming part of agency practice which can nurture and enhance the skills of public servants throughout their careers and address changing skill requirements. Driving engagement to create a positive work environment and attract dedicated employees can enhance performance measured through job satisfaction, sense of accomplishment, and organisational attachment.

Addressing limited resources and financial dependence is crucial to ensuring the agencies' long-term sustainability and ability to achieve their strategic objectives. Agencies may benefit from being part of networks like CEENQA to benefit from knowledge sharing and capacity building that could foster their sustainable growth. They may also seek support and guidance in addressing their financial constraints.

At the European level, discussions are ongoing as part of the QA FIT project, gathering comprehensive evidence and reflecting on if and how the current EHEA framework of the ESG is perceived. This presents an opportunity to evaluate and strengthen the ESG, ensuring its alignment with the evolving landscape of higher education. A new or revised ESG may consider alternative approaches to fostering innovation in quality assurance, including digitalisation in higher education and agency work.

With concerted efforts from agencies, governments, and stakeholders, European quality assurance can continue to evolve and uphold the standards of excellence in higher education, aligning with the changing dynamics of the education landscape.

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# DEVELOPMENTS IN HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

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## INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance agencies need adequate financial, material and human resources in order to successfully fulfil their mission and strategic goals. Organizations that build a quality culture that recognizes their employees and their wellbeing as the greatest potential for their advancement and sustainable development are more successful in that. The question is how to build a business environment that encourages the development of the organization and each employee. How to be competitive, strive for excellence and, at the same time, take care of the balance of private life and work?

Europe today faces numerous demographic challenges related to population decline, migration and population aging. We are witnessing that due to rapid technological development and changes in economies, some occupations are becoming obsolete, and new occupations and new jobs are emerging. Europe recognizes the importance of continuous and planned investment in education and training in order for individuals, organizations, economies and societies to successfully develop and position themselves in an ever-changing world. The European Council conclusions[1] adopted on 14 December 2017 put education and training at the heart of the European political agenda for the first time. The quality of education, including higher education, is inextricably linked to the development of quality assurance. External quality assurance in Europe has been developing more systematically since 2000. The development of external quality assurance is related to the development of quality assurance agencies and the development of QA professionals who work in those agencies. Not so long ago, it was not easy to simply explain what quality assurance professionals in quality assurance agencies actually do. Which competencies employees in European quality assurance agencies should have and what are the possible paths/directions of their career development?

The development of external quality assurance was encouraged by the establishment of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, which was transformed to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), which enabled their members to engage in networking, transfer of good practice, development, implementation and enhancement of joint standards, staff development, and through work on joint projects and in working groups  they seek solutions to numerous challenges they face in their scope of work. In order to encourage further development of the staff in QA agencies ENQA established ENQA Staff development group in 2012 which operated until 2016. This working group focused on identifying and supporting the needs of quality assurance agencies with regards to the development and professionalisation of their staff. The work resulted in 2014 with a report[2] on the findings, and a competence framework[3]  for quality assurance professionals. The competences were identified for new entrants to the quality assurance sector and for experienced professionals. This document has been used by quality assurance agencies that have being operating in European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as a basis for job design process, recruitment and staff development activities.

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1    https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32179/14-final-conclusions-en.pdf

2    https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/SDG-final-report.pdf

3    https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENQA-Competencies-Framework.pdf

Quality assurance agencies which are part of the public sector have also used this document in order to present the specific features of competence profiles of their employees to responsible ministries and higher education institutions.

ENQA and CEENQA continued providing support to the development of the competence profile of their members' staff in accordance with their interests and needs. This is also evidenced by numerous staff exchange programmes and programmes such as ENQA Leadership Development Programme, which has been active since 2018. This article aims to explore state of play of human resources management in CEENQA member agencies. It is based on the findings of a research study conducted among CEENQA members in March 2023. The findings can be used for promotion of good practice, discussion on possible solutions and advancement in some aspects of human resources management in specific agencies and further development and use of competence framework for QA professionals.

## THE APPROACH FOR ANALYSING HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

In the period 1—17 March 2023, Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) carried out an online survey on the topic of *People and culture in Quality Assurance agencies.* The survey was distributed by CEENQA Secretariat to all CEENQA members. The purpose of the survey was to gather information, analyse and evaluate the current state of human resources management in CEENQA member agencies. The aim of the survey was also to gain insight in a review of existing practices and challenges related to various topics concerning HR management and staff development in CEENQA member agencies and to encourage further improvement related to the human resources management processes.

The survey was developed within the Erasmus+ project *Modernisation of Higher Education Institutions through enhancement of Human resources management function* (HRMinHEI)[4] in which ASHE participated. The creation of the survey was led by Professor Zoran Sušanj, PhD, of the University of Rijeka, Croatia.

For the CEENQA survey, the questions were modified and adapted to take into account the organizational specific features of quality assurance agencies in EHEA.

The questionnaire is based on the analytical framework for human resources management in quality assurance agencies, which is an adapted version of a multi-dimensional process human resources management model titled HR Navigator (Pausits, 2017). The adapted model links the implementation of European and national policies with the development strategies of the quality assurance agencies, including the human resources management strategy. The model consists of 10 interrelated sub-processes of human resources management: HR strategy and planning, Job demands, Recruitment and selection, Performance evaluation, Training and development, Career progression, Pay and Benefits, HR analyses and reporting, HEIs' HR Special issues and Information systems and personnel administration.

A five-degree scale was used for answers:
1. does not apply to our QAA
2. slightly applies to our QAA
3. moderately applies to our QAA
4. largely applies to our QAA
5. fully applies to our QAA

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4    https://www.azvo.hr/hr/news-archive/2059-results-of-the-hrminhei-project-presented

Survey responses were submitted by 19 agencies. With regard to the legal status of QAA, 79% of respondents were from public sector agencies and 21% from the private sector. The collected information suggests that there is a big difference in the number of full-time staff in QA agencies. The number of full-time staff employed in an agency ranges from 2 to 158, median=27.6. The number of full-time employees is reflected on the need and possibility to employ HR professionals who will make a professional contribution to the development of a positive organizational climate and take care of the staff's career development. 21% respondents stated that they didn't employ HR professionals, while 63% of them stated that they employed one HR professional.

## HR STRATEGY AND PLANNING

In accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), QA agencies are obligated to perform a transparent and efficient strategic planning process, including the human resource field. In accordance with ESG 3.1 and 3.6, each QA agency is expected to clearly define its mission, vision and to adopt a long-term strategic development document and an annual strategic plan. Agencies should also ensure conditions for the implementation of adopted documents and establish a culture of reporting on its achievements. Strategic documents and goals can only be achieved if adequate financial, material and human resources are provided (ESG 3.5). HR strategy and development plan represent an integral and fundamental part of strategic planning. The goal is to adopt a clear vision and a plan of development of human resources. It is necessary to analyse the current situation and determine organizational strengths and weaknesses regarding staff distribution in an organization and organizational units. Data on staffing level by different categories (age, vocation, work experience, competences, salary structure, etc.) should be analysed and used to adopt a plan that will link the current HR situation with fulfilment of an organization's strategic goals, the decision-making process and revision of existing plans.

According to the survey responses, 68% respondents stated that they fully or largely agree that specific HR strategies are part of the QAA's overall strategy and 79% respondents stated that they fully or largely agree that they make plans for HR development. 14 out of 19 agencies (77%) responded that they fully or largely agree that all their employees are aware of how HR action plans translate into their individual goals.

Current practice in CEENQA member agencies indicates that there is room for improvement in the area of HR strategic management, planning and implementation of adopted plans. The adoption of a strategic document that includes the area of human resources management does not guarantee the effectiveness of its implementation. Employees should be motivated and continuously encouraged to implement the adopted plans, linking the achievement of individual goals and continuous professional development with achievement of the organization's strategic goals.

## JOB DEMANDS

Every organization, including a QA agency, should make a list of business processes and activities/ jobs it performs. They should analyse the ways in which each job is integrated into the organizational structure and in what way it contributes to the achievement of organizational goals. Activities are commonly divided into key jobs and other jobs. Job demands include job specification which includes basic information pertaining to the position, list of tasks, duties, responsibilities and work conditions, performance standards and interrelation with other jobs. This is a basis for determining competences necessary for performing certain jobs and planning future demands and needs with regard to task, rights and responsibilities.

Job demands are documented in the job systematization which also can be used as a basis for selecting new and developing existing employees.

The data gathered through the questionnaire indicate that 15/19 (79%) QAAs have, to a certain extent, a documented procedure for writing job descriptions, which is represented in *Figure 1.*

**In our QAA, we have documented procedures for writing job descriptions**
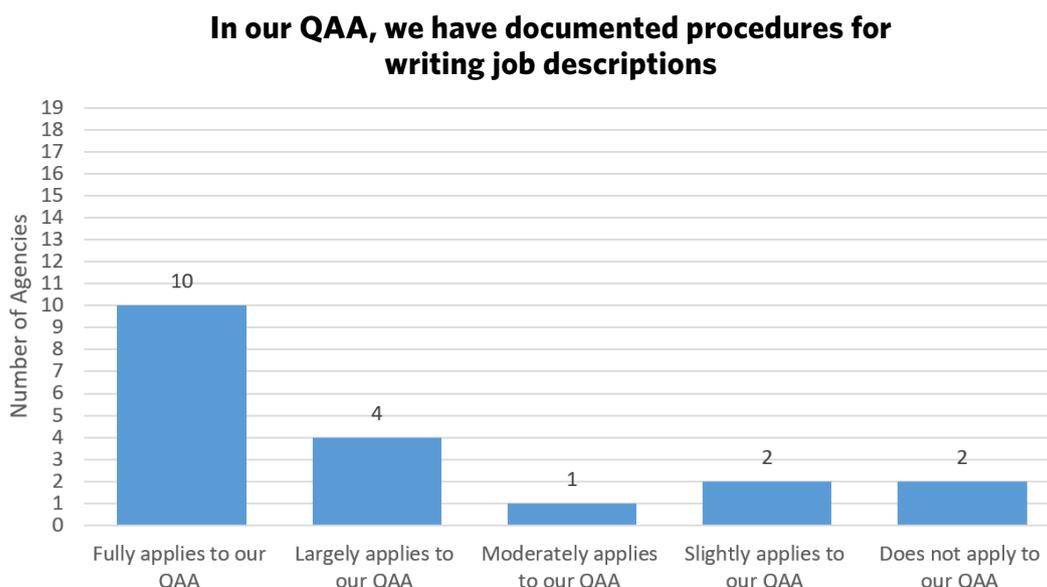


*Figure 1 The degree to which procedures for writing job descriptions in CEENQA members are documented, March 2023*

According to the collected responses, 68% of the agencies more and 21% less regularly review job descriptions and update them in accordance with job changes.

## RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

The aim of the process is putting the right people in the right places. It is necessary to select a candidate who would be the most suitable for a particular job. In accordance with a good business practice, the recruitment and selection procedure is expected to be transparent and fair and to be implemented in accordance with the national legislation. HR strategy defines the type of employees – especially professional staff in specialist positions, who are highly qualified employees, that agencies need, selection criteria and the way they will recruit staff. In the case of public agencies, recruitment, terms and conditions and rewards for staff are usually heavily regulated by the government. Private QA agencies have great autonomy to take staffing decisions.

The initial selection is usually carried out based on the verification of the data submitted through the application form and the candidate's CV in order to eliminate candidates who do not meet the basic requirements. Substantive selection is the next and the most important stage of the selection process, used to select the most suitable candidate through various forms of testing in addition to the selection interview. It is customary that the final choice of a new employee is based on performance in the trial period.

The survey results for this area indicate that 11 agencies adjust their recruitment strategies and procedures in order to source the candidates who best support their organisational goals. Most agencies which participated in the survey (14/19) have fully or largely defined the selection process in terms of selection tests and procedures and 57% adopted annual recruitment plans. These data indicate that QA agencies understand the importance of the recruitment and selection process for the future development of the agency, improving the quality of service and increasing efficiency, and there are a lot more opportunities for research and improvement in this area in practice.

**PERFORMANCE EVALUATION: THE PROCESS AND PRACTICE OF MONITORING AND REVIEWING WHETHER EMPLOYEES REACH THE REQUIRED PERFORMANCE STANDARDS**

Performance monitoring is in the interest of the agency, both at the organizational level and at the level of an individual employee, since it enables both the individual and the agency to achieve their goals. Organizational goals are, among other things, obtaining information about employee development and obtaining information for making informed decisions on rewards, development, promotion, etc., while the goals of employees are obtaining valid feedback on their efficiency and performance, as well as obtaining rewards and opportunities for personal development. The performance evaluation process consists of three interrelated steps: defining the job and performance criteria, performance evaluation, and giving feedback - the interview about performance evaluation results. In doing so, it is important to develop a culture of organizational fairness within an agency, which is defined as the level of employee's perception of whether they are treated fairly in the organization.

The perception of fairness is based on the processes and practices of human resources management, which should be consistent, impartial and morally acceptable.

Feedback collected from CEENQA members indicates that out of a total of 19 agencies that responded:
- 11 agencies reported that they have fully or largely established their own system for performance evaluation of employees
- 10 agencies confirmed that it is entirely true that their employees are informed about the criteria used for performance evaluation and
- 12 agencies conduct performance appraisals annually, while three agencies conduct them semi-annually and another three more frequently (e.g., monthly or weekly).

Survey results indicate that only four agencies fully use KPIs in performance evaluation, which is represented in *Figure 2*, while only five agencies use competences to a full extent.

**In our QAA, we use key performance indicators (KPI's; results of work activities) in staff performance evaluation**
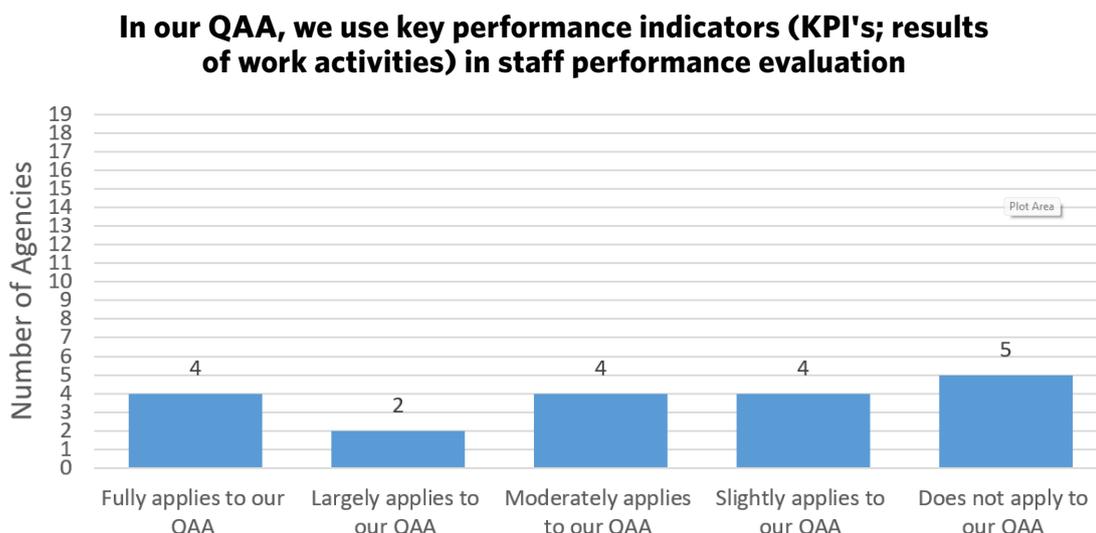


*Figure 2 The degree to which KPI's have been used in staff performance evaluation in CEENQA members, March 2023*

Only 6 out of 19 agencies fully or largely agree that if performance review resulted in poor performance for a certain employee they have mechanisms in place to deal with poor performance. The fact that 8 agencies fully or largely agreed to use the results of performance evaluation to introduce changes indicates that the PDCA cycle in this area is not being completed.

The collected feedback indicates that the culture of establishment of a fair, consistent and complete performance evaluation is an area that needs to be further developed in most agencies.

## TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The rapid changes in the operation, changes of standards and development and use of new technologies also influence changes in job demands. The basic qualifications of employees are usually no longer sufficient for a successful career. For an efficient performance of business tasks, employees should be provided with an opportunity for continuous learning and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, from basic to more complex ones.

Analysis of human resources for the purpose of determining educational needs is carried out based on three situations: a) review of existing knowledge and skills of employees, b) identifying the *necessary* knowledge and skills for successful operation, c) forecast of knowledge and skills needed in the future. The work performance management system usually provides information about the development needs of employees and serves as a basis for career development planning.

Training may be formal or informal; it can be on-the-job or off-the-job. Training and development plans should be defined on an annual basis based on the HR strategic development plans, job demands and results of performance evaluation. The aim is to develop employees' expertise and specific skills, in order to improve their performance.

Agencies that create new knowledge, disseminate it throughout the organization and quickly incorporate it into new services are more successful in dealing with challenges and introducing necessary changes.

Based on the survey analysis 17 agencies reported that they prepare development plans for QA staff, while 12 out of 19 agencies responded that they prepared development and training plans for other employees.

Types of training the agencies provide to their staff also differ. According to the survey results, 15 agencies reported that they provide training in QA related topics, 10 provide training in soft skills, 14 in job related topics and 9 provide training in management/leadership, which is represented in Figure 3.

**In our QAA, we provide training and development programs for upgrading staff competencies in**
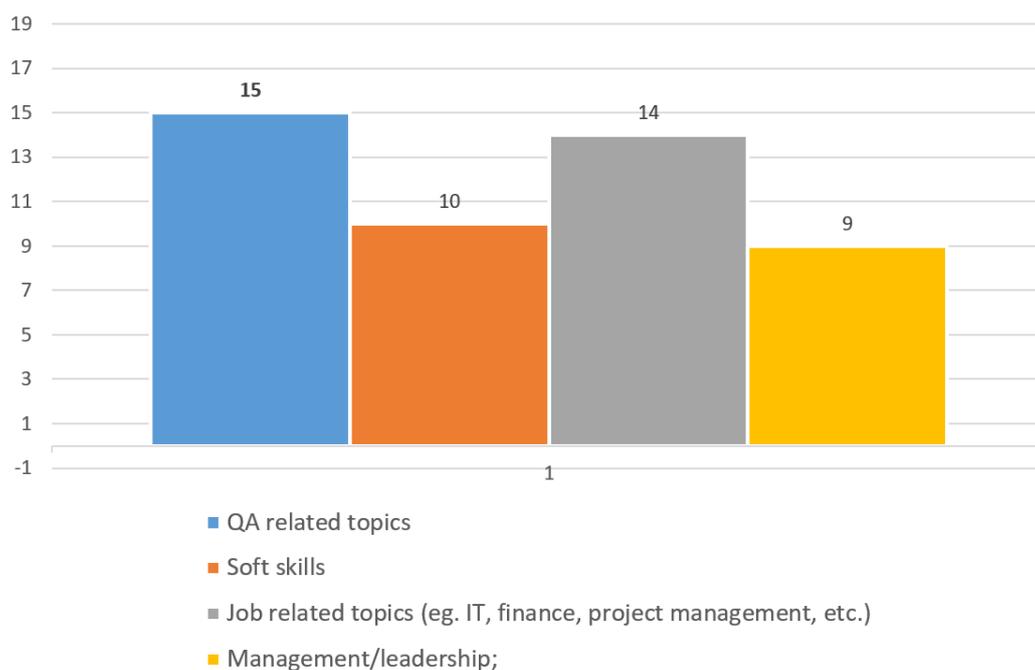


*Figure 3. Distribution of different types of training that CEENQA members agencies provide to their staff, March 2023*

Institutional leaders who are leading QA agencies need professional management skills and specific experience. This was also recognized by ENQA which offered its members leadership development programmes[5] for leaders in QA agencies. The Programme was first launched in 2018 and following high participant satisfaction ENQA launched a fourth edition in 2023. A style of leadership called transformational leadership is especially valued today, and research has shown that it is positively associated with outcomes such as employees' loyalty to the organization, clarity of work roles and a sense of well-being among employees.

For the realization of each training and development plan, it is necessary to secure sufficient financial resources. Agencies have different possibilities and practices for distributing funds. Most of the agencies which responded to the survey (16) reported to have their budget for training allocated at the agency level, while two agencies reported to have it allocated at departmental level, and two at the level of an employee.

## CAREER PROGRESSION

It is a process of planning and aligning organizational objectives with employee's career goals and aspirations. Agencies should adopt a career policy for informing the employees, encouraging their career progression, ensuring equal opportunities or funding. The process of career progression generally includes the selection and monitoring of prospective or promising employees, the selection and development of successors or deputies to key managers, and a system of mentors, internal trainers or consultants. Systematic career progression serves to retain and motivate high-quality staff and reduces fluctuations, negative work behaviour, as well as the consequences of stress in the workplace. Career progression of employees should be systematically planned and implemented.

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5   https://www.enqa.eu/projects/enqa-leadership-programme-2023/

When we look at practice in CEENQA member agencies regarding some aspects of career progression it is interesting to notice that the majority of agencies (12 out of 19) responded that career progression is either largely or moderately, but not fully, aligned with employee aspirations. The collected data also indicate that, in practice, promotion of employees within an agency is not sufficiently based on the results achieved. A clear link between performance evaluation and career progression was reported by only four agencies. Despite all the challenges, career progression of employees should be systematically planned and implemented.

## PAY AND BENEFITS

Employee pay and benefit system in the quality assurance agencies which are part of the public sector is defined by the national legislative framework. Although government funding is the main source of income in most public agencies, an increasing number of agencies increase the share of income from other sources such as competitive funding instruments or fees funding. An increased reliance on earned income can shift organizational priorities and reshape values.

Specialisation represents an important change in an organizational culture. Highly specialized staff, especially those with the ability to generate revenue from competitive funding instruments through the innovation activities or cross-border activities, are particularly valuable to their agency.

Rewarding is defined as a process of recognizing and rewarding employees' performance. Basic salary is determined by the requirements of a particular job and it usually consists of fixed remuneration. Salary supplements and other benefits for rewarding job performance or encouraging staff loyalty are used to stimulate employee efficiency and encourage their personal development in order to meet the agency's needs. Employees who achieve excellent results should have the opportunity to develop their careers within an agency, expect promotion to a position with a higher salary and greater responsibility, as well as an increase in the salary including its basic and variable part.

Based on the survey results 11 out of 19 agencies reported that have their pay and benefit systems regulated at the national level, while 4 reported that they have it regulated at the organizational level and two mentioned collective agreements. Ten respondents consider the rewarding system in their agency to be transparent, while the others see it as transparent to a certain extent. Eight agencies reported that they fully or to a large extent collect feedback on the pay and benefits system from their employees. Although the pay and benefits system is expected to be based on the performance evaluation system, the collected data indicate that most agencies reported that either it is not the case that managers of a unit decide on the changes in pay and benefits of employees in their agencies, or that they do that but to a slight or moderate extent.

The collected data indicate that if QA agencies want to recruit and retain highly specialized staff who are important for the development of their scope of work, they need to pay additional attention to the development of a fair pay and benefits system.

## HR ANALYSES AND REPORTING

HRM analyses and reporting refers to the process of preparing and disseminating various data on employees to relevant bodies for the purpose of monitoring and improving HRM processes. A HR specialist or department is usually responsible for carrying out an advanced analysis based on collected quantitative data, assessments of employee competences, information about attitudes towards the work environment and analyses of an organisational climate and culture.

In order to compare personnel data between employees and between different organizational units of an agency it is necessary to standardise the way information is collected. Well-formatted forms and questionnaires should be developed and systematically used for data collection, analyses of obtained data and drafting of reports. Feedback should be provided to all employees. Most agencies today use a comprehensive IT software to support HR processes. Based on survey responses, 12 out 19 agencies reported that HR reports form an integral part of their overall reporting system and 11 agencies produce HR analyses and reports in order to improve and monitor the processes of managing people in an organisation. Agencies reported that they regularly conduct (represented in Figure 4):

- Quantitative analysis of personnel in all positions – 12 agencies
- Job attitudes survey – 8 agencies
- Employee well-being survey – 5 agencies
- Organizational climate and culture survey – 7 agencies
- Evaluation of different HR plans (career progression, training and development, pay and benefits, performance evaluation, etc.) – 8 agencies
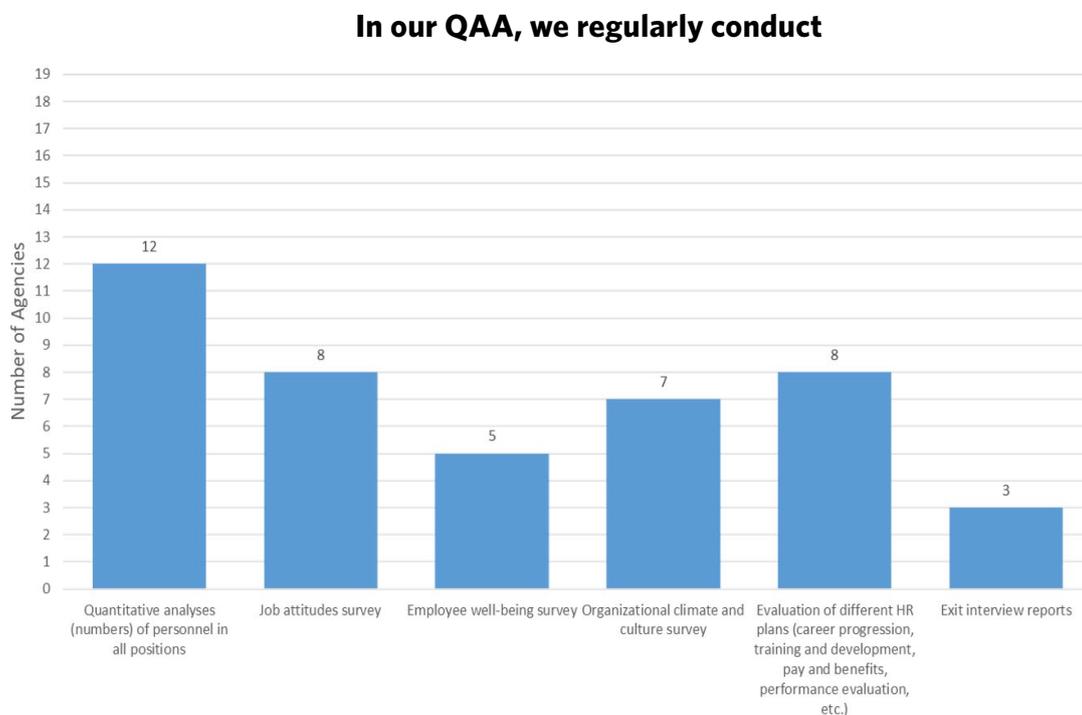- Exit interview reports – 3 agencies.

**In our QAA, we regularly conduct**



*Figure 4.    Distribution of different types of analyses conducted by CEENQA members aiming to monitor and improve HRM processes, March 2023*

## HEIs' HR SPECIAL ISSUES

Every organisation has specific issues related to work aspects that are important to employees and that affect their performance and efficiency. Dealing with and resolving such issues might have a positive impact on general employee satisfaction and their efficiency. Examples of special topics are occupational health, safety and well-being, informing of employees, achieving balance between professional and private life, different forms of discrimination, stress in the workplace, etc. HRM analyses usually point to specific challenges and help HR specialist to identify them. Special issues should be addressed and operationalized. A plan of activities for improvement should be developed, a desired outcome should be defined and a group of employees faced with a specific challenge should be engaged in the implementation of activities for improvement.

According to the survey results, 14 out of 19 agencies reported that, to some extent (fully, largely or moderately) they implement processes to enhance health, safety and well-being of employees above their legal minimum level.

11 agencies reported that they implement diversity policies fully or to a large extent. These data indicate that the agencies have detected specific topics that refer to different work aspects and that they put effort into finding solutions that will lead to improvements and positively influence employee satisfaction and their efficiency.

**INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION**

The aim of the process is to ensure that all personnel and work status documentation comply with the labour law and other relevant legislation, and are easily accessible to managerial staff at all levels. In the digitalisation era the aim is to integrate the use of the new technology (IT system) with managing personal data on all employees. The level of authorisation and security protocols should be defined by the agencies.

Thirteen agencies reported that they have developed IT software for HR processes to a certain extent. Only 4 QA agencies have comprehensive IT software that supports the development of the staff portfolio. Eight agencies have a team responsible for providing HR data and analytics while six agencies fully and four largely agree that all managers have access to reports on their staff. The analysed data suggest that the use of information systems and enhancement of personnel administration on employees in CEENQA members is still in progress.

**CONCLUSION**

The development and positioning of quality assurance agencies, the fulfilment of their mission and the realization of strategic goals is closely and inextricably linked with continuous and planned investments in the development of human resources, both QA professionals and other employees. The development of the competence profile for quality assurance professionals produced by ENQA Staff Development Group in 2016 encouraged QA agencies operating within the EHEA to take a more systematic approach to HR management. The experiences in the development of good practices in the field of HR management remain in the focus of interest of both leaders and all employees of QA agencies. QA agencies want to be recognized as employers who take care of the development and wellbeing of their employees, and harmonization of the business goals of the organization with the business goals and needs of their employees.

The results of an online survey conducted in March 2023 among CEENQA members on the topic of People and culture in QA agencies indicate that, regardless of the diversity and specificity of the context in which QA agencies operate, most agencies have identified the need for taking a strategic approach to human resources development, and state that they have adopted specific HR strategies which are part of their overall QAA's strategy.

However, only a half of the agencies that responded to the survey stated that they clearly communicate their HR strategy, which is one of the essential prerequisites for closing the PDCA cycle, a successful implementation of accepted strategic plans and motivating employees to improve their efficiency and contribute to the achievement of their personal and organization's business goals.

The analysis has shown that most agencies establish a culture of preparing development and training plans for all employees, as well as a documented procedure for writing job descriptions. Most agencies stated that they defined measurable quantitative and qualitative indicators which should be used in their employee performance evaluation system.

The collected data indicate that developing a culture that fully uses competences and KPIs for performance evaluation of employees is a critical area to be further developed in most agencies. It was also established that most agencies did not clearly link performance evaluation of employees with their career progression. Moreover, most respondents, if they identify poor performance of employees, do not have any mechanisms in place to deal with poor performance.

The used analytical model enabled the identification of common problems. The exchange of good practices in all areas, especially those that have been identified as areas that need to be improved, can help in finding high-quality solutions to the challenges and obstacles that QA agencies face. It is not sufficient that leaders merely declaratively support the establishment of HR management. Agencies also need to create an environment in which the accepted policies will be implemented in practice, and to build a culture fostering coordinated achievement of goals defined at an employee and agency level.

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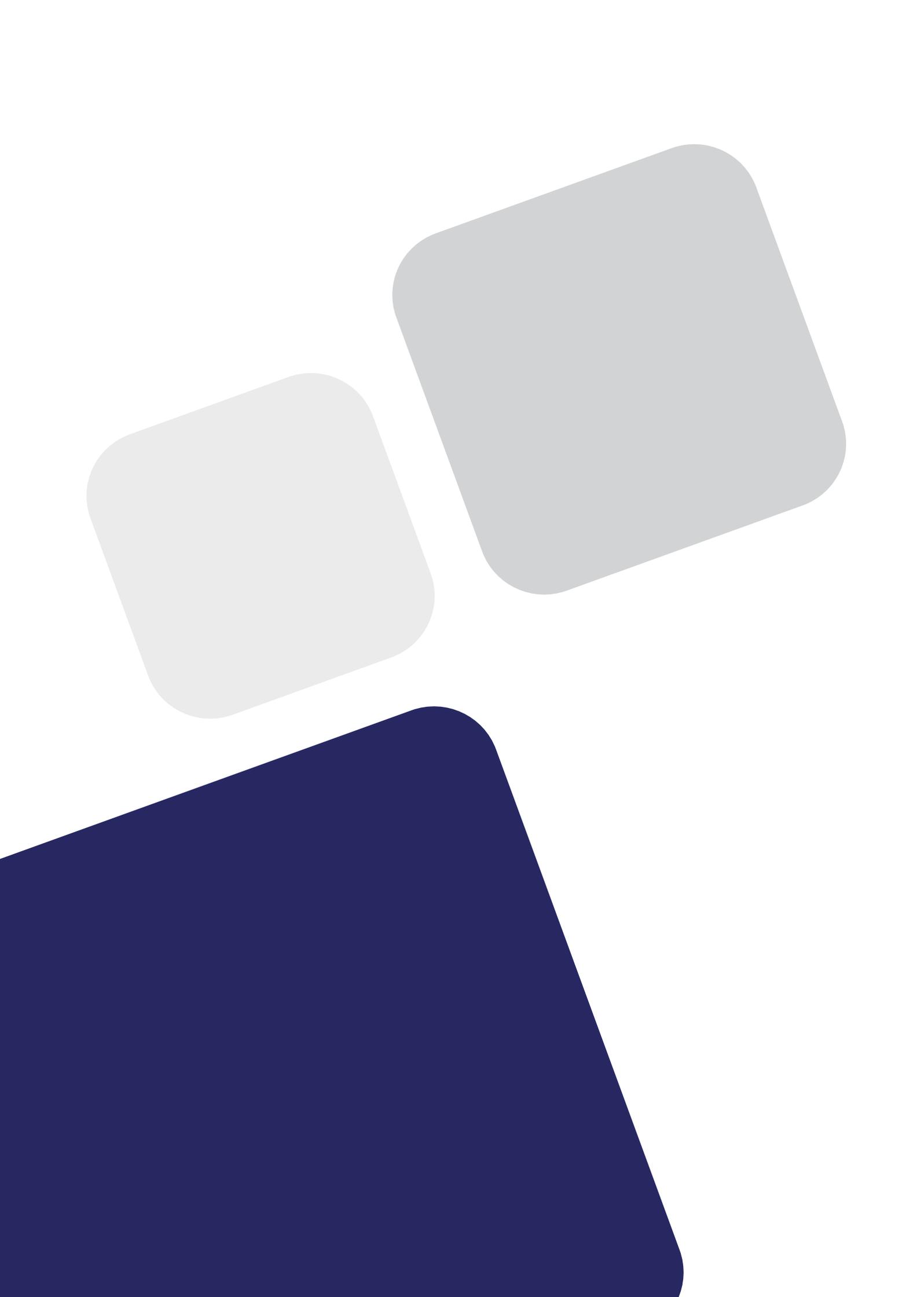
# HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT AT THE SLOVENIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Employees are key to the success of any organisation. Even with rapid technological advancements and the rise of artificial intelligence, an organisation cannot thrive without its human workforce. It is therefore very important for the success of an organisation that the recruitment and development of staff is strategically planned. Managers need to be aware of the personnel requirements necessary to achieve their goals, devise effective acquisition strategies, and prioritise measures to retain valuable employees (Svetlin, 2014). In the era of globalisation, evolving job types, and remote work opportunities, organisations must adapt to increased flexibility and the potential for faster job rotations.

The Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as "the Agency") is aware of these factors. In 2018, it adopted a special document that thoroughly analysed the field of employees within the Agency, the possibilities for their professional development, and outlined a plan for their future professional growth. The document was also created in response to the findings of a panel of experts from ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) during their external evaluation of the Agency, highlighting the need for systematic employee development. The Agency will regularly update the document (first update in February 2023) to monitor progress in this area.

The Agency recognizes that employee satisfaction extends beyond fair salary and professional development opportunities. A conducive work environment, positive interpersonal relationships, and an employer's consideration for an individual's work-life balance all contribute to overall job satisfaction. In Slovenia, an increasing number of companies are paying more attention to work-life balance. Some of these companies have entered the certification system to obtain the "Family-Friendly Enterprise"[1] certification (Knaflič, 2010). The Agency itself is also aware that its success primarily depends on its employees and their satisfaction, which is why it initiated a project in 2019 to obtain the "Family-Friendly Enterprise" certification. This certification enables the implementation of measures designed to enhance employee well-being and support a balance between their professional and personal lives.

## ANALYSIS OF THE HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT IN THE AGENCY

The Agency is a public legal entity responsible for ensuring quality in higher education and providing developmental and advisory work in this domain[2]. Its employees are of immense importance for the Agency's work and development, currently comprising 21 individuals, including the director.

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1  http://www.certifikatdpp.si/for-english-speakers/.

2  Article 51.e of the Higher Education Act (OGRS, No 32/2012-UPB7 – official consolidated version, 40/12-ZUJF, 57/12-ZPCP-2D, 109/12, 85/14, 75/16, 61/17 – ZUPŠ, 65/17, 175/20 – ZIUOPDVE, 57/21 – odl. US, 54/22 – ZUPŠ-1 and 100/22 – ZSZUN).

To ensure effective, efficient, and coordinated task execution, the Agency is organized into three sectors[3]: the Department of Quality Assurance and International Cooperation (9 employees), the Department of Analytics and Information Technology (6 employees), and the General Affairs Department (5 employees).

To enhance work quality, improve the working environment, and achieve strategic goals that prioritize the personal growth and professional development of employees, the Agency developed a Human Resources Development Plan[4] in 2018. To accomplish this, a comprehensive analysis of the current state was conducted, and a customized questionnaire was prepared for the employees. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions, with the initial two aimed at determining their educational background and job positions, followed by the duration of employment in the Agency and its predecessor organisations. Two questions focused on job-related aspects, while the remaining questions addressed the employees' aspirations, interests, and motivation for working in the Agency. Employees were also asked about their career objectives and working conditions within the Agency. Based on the survey results, it was found that the employees' career goals were closely tied to personal satisfaction and the achievement of tangible outcomes. Other significant factors included acquiring new knowledge and skills, advancement opportunities, and a pleasant and stimulating work environment.

According to the responses, the employees acknowledged the Agency's efforts in providing favourable working conditions. These included flexible working hours, opportunities for morning exercise, comfortable work environments, and the option of remote work under specific circumstances. Additionally, employees appreciated the ability to plan and utilize vacation days, the consideration of their opinions, incentives and commendations, a culture of openness, the provision of a healthy breakfast twice per year, a hike on a city hill, and access to all necessary work resources.

However, the survey also revealed areas where employees expressed less satisfaction, particularly in terms of opportunities for career advancement, continuing education, and the development of their skills and competencies. It was noted that professional growth had been somewhat neglected in recent years. As a suggestion, employees proposed organizing informal and formal events that would enable stronger connections among colleagues and contribute to a relaxed, cohesive, and more creative work environment at the Agency.

After conducting an analysis, the Agency compared the requirements and conditions of job positions outlined in the job classification system with the data gathered from the employees' questionnaires. The findings revealed an interesting trend: the actual education level of the Agency's employees exceeded the educational requirements specified by the job classification system[5]. In other words, the Agency had a highly educated workforce that surpassed the educational qualifications needed for their respective positions. Specifically, 50 % of the job positions required an education at level 8 of the Slovenian Qualifications Framework (SQF) and 45% a 7th level of education.[6] However, 83 % of the agency's employees had an education at level 8 or higher, compared to 11 % whose highest education was on level 7.

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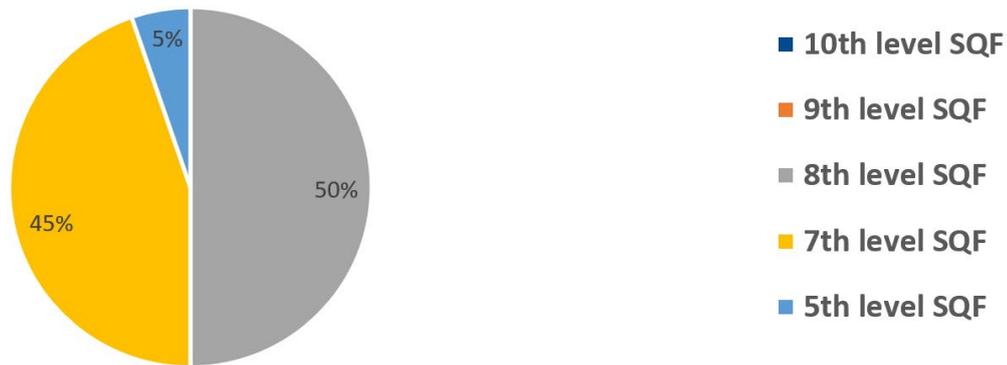3   https://www.nakvis.si/about-sqaa/organization/?lang=en.

4   Human Resources Development Plan, no. 010-16/2020/34, dated September 3, 2018.

5   Act on Internal Organization and Job Classification in the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, No. 1001-3/2010/22 dated March 21, 2018, with amendments.

6   Level 8 in the SQF is level 7 in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and level 7 in the SQF is level 6 in the EQF.

**Educational requirements specified by the job classification system**



- 10th level SQF
- 9th level SQF
- 8th level SQF
- 7th level SQF
- 5th level SQF

**Employees' actual education**



- 10th level SQF
- 9th level SQF
- 8th level SQF
- 7th level SQF
- 5th level SQF

Source: Human Resources Development Plan 2018

These findings led to the aforementioned Human Resources Development Plan, which focuses on the following areas:
- training and education of employees for their professional development;
- orientation training for newly hired employees
- rewards and advancement of employees;
- workforce planning;
- technology and a healthy work environment.

**PLANNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE AGENCY**

The Agency conducted an initial assessment of the current state in each of the mentioned areas, followed by the formulation of proposals for necessary improvements. Subsequently, the document provides a comprehensive plan for each of these areas.

Identifying the **wishes and motivation of employees** is emphasized as crucial for planning the further professional development of the Agency's staff. These aspects are regularly assessed through employee satisfaction surveys, questionnaires regarding training and education preferences, as well as annual interviews between employees and the director. These interviews provide an opportunity for employees to reflect on their work in the past year, suggest improvements, express their wishes for education and career development, and indicate any additional or different responsibilities they would like to take on within the Agency. Employees can also express their interests and educational needs during regular weekly meetings, discussions with department heads, the director, or with the person responsible for employee training.

Using the gathered information, the Agency develops the **Annual Training Plan** aligned with projected financial resources. This plan includes seminars, conferences, trainings, and other educational events based on employees' expressed preferences.

As most positions require knowledge of the English language, the Agency supports the employees' participation in English language courses. Additionally, employees have the opportunity to attend courses in other foreign languages such as German, French, Russian, and Spanish. A refresher seminar on the use of the General Administrative Procedure Act is organized for employees every two to three years. Moreover, employees have the opportunity to participate in events, workshops, and conferences focused on quality assurance and other relevant areas of higher education. These opportunities aim to enhance and deepen their knowledge in specific work areas. The Agency enables employees to participate in various projects, domestic and international conferences, meetings, consultations, trainings, and seminars. These events include those organized by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA), the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), and other international associations for quality assurance in higher education, as well as conferences and consultations organized by Slovenian higher education institutions. The Agency also encourages collaboration with foreign agencies and the ministry responsible for higher education.

Each employee is expected to attend at least two seminars, courses, or conferences annually. Employees performing jobs that require a minimum of secondary vocational education are entitled to a minimum of 5 days of professional training directly associated with their responsibilities. The Agency strongly emphasises supporting the professional development of its employees and actively encourages them to pursue higher qualifications. It has established agreements with several employees to support their further education in bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs related to the Agency's field of work. This commitment to employee education is also reflected in the Annual Training Plan, which sets aside dedicated financial resources to support employees seeking higher qualifications.

The **Agency's professional work is also being improved** through a specific document called the Guide to External Assessments[7]. This document is designed for Agency experts, Agency's staff, and all other stakeholders involved in accreditation and evaluation procedures. Its purpose is to enhance the assessment of compliance with quality standards during accreditation and evaluation processes. The Agency initially organized special training meetings for its staff to ensure a better understanding of the guide. During these meetings, employees presented individual standards and guidelines, and discussed the interpretation and application of specific provisions and criteria. This significant step aimed to improve and unify the work of employees who are also advising Agency experts in utilizing the guide.

When **recognizing and rewarding employees' performance,** the Agency operates within the framework of regulations applicable to the public sector, as it is a direct non-governmental budget user. The Public Sector Salary System Act[8] governs the Agency's approach to rewarding outstanding work performance based on specific criteria defined by regulations. These rewards are paid on a monthly basis. Additionally, occasional performance-based payments are possible to acknowledge increased workload. In such cases, the director, in collaboration with department heads, closely monitors the employees' performance and may provide additional payments for exceeding expected results. Furthermore, the Agency conducts annual assessments to determine the employees' eligibility for promotion within their salary grade, as mandated by

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7   Debevec, T., Širok, J. 2022. Guide to External Assessments, NAKVIS (https://www.nakvis.si/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Guide-to-assessments-SQAA-NAKVIS.pdf)

8   Public Sector Salary System Act, OGRS, No 108/09 – official consolidated version with amendments.

legislation. Employees who meet the requirements can be promoted by one or two salary grades every three years.

The Agency is committed to enabling employees to do tasks that align with their competencies, abilities, and preferences to the fullest extent possible. **Workforce recruitment** is an ongoing process throughout the year, with a primary focus during the budget preparation phase. During this time, the Agency evaluates its staffing needs and develops a personnel plan for the next two years, taking into consideration available financial resources. This plan considers factors such as anticipated work process requirements, employee promotions, potential departures, and projected retirements. In situations where employees are absent due to reasons such as maternity leave, extended illness, longer vacations, or additional work, the Agency manages the workload by redistributing tasks among other employees, employing temporary staff, or, when suitable, engaging students through a student employment service. Starting from 2018 until 2023, the Agency **gradually assigned** employees with higher qualifications than required for their job classification **to higher positions,** thereby closing the gap between the employees' actual education and the education required for their job classification.

Upon hiring **new employees,** the Agency prioritizes their smooth integration by familiarizing them with applicable regulations and internal policies. They also receive a dedicated training to ensure safe job performance. One of the employees, designated by the director, provides an overview of the Agency's operations and structure, introduces colleagues, offers guidance on their assigned tasks, and remains available for any further clarifications. In some cases, a probationary period may be included in the employment contract, during which the new employee's performance is monitored by a special commission. If necessary, the new employee may be sent for a pre-employment medical examination.

Creating a **healthy work environment** extends beyond employee well-being and positive interpersonal relationships. The Agency recognizes the importance of providing **appropriate work equipment.** Therefore, it regularly updates its technical equipment and tools, such as computers, screens, office chairs, and other essential equipment. This ensures that employees have the necessary resources for efficient and comfortable work performance.

In 2019, the Agency joined a project to obtain the **"Family-Friendly Enterprise" certificate.** As part of this initiative, the Agency implemented 16 measures[9] aimed at improving employee well-being and promoting a better balance between their professional and personal lives. These measures included remote work, establishing boundaries for work-related communication outside working hours, designated quiet hours to facilitate uninterrupted work, career planning before retirement, and the option to bring children or pets to the workplace, among others. In March 2020, the Agency obtained the basic certificate, and in May 2023, it further implemented three additional measures, subsequently earning the full certificate. To oversee the implementation of these measures and consider proposals for additional initiatives, a team for work-life balance was established as part of the project. The positive impact of these measures on employee satisfaction is evident from annual surveys, which consistently show improvement in this area.

The Agency actively promotes employee health and well-being through **the health promotion team,** which was established in 2015. Its purpose is to raise awareness about healthcare in the workplace by organizing activities such as providing healthy meals, organizing hiking trips, and promoting social interactions among employees. The group actively informs employees about blood donation campaigns and works towards creating a pleasant work environment. In collaboration with the School of Drawing and Painting, the group facilitated the display of students' art pieces on the Agency's empty office walls, thus further enhancing the work environment. The group organizes an annual joint flower planting event as part of their health promotion activities.

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9    Regulation on the Implementation of Measures for Obtaining the Family-Friendly Enterprise Certificate, No. 101-16/2010/50 dated June 10, 2020, with amendments.

**REMOTE WORK**

The Agency has been allowing some employees to work from home since its establishment in 2010. Initially, it was offered to employees who lived far from the office or had health-related concerns. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Agency enabled all employees to work from home. With the proven success of remote work, the Agency continued to implement it in 2020 and 2021. In February 2022, it introduced a permanent hybrid work model, where employees work in the office two days a week and from home for the remaining three days.

The Agency provided all employees with the necessary equipment for remote work, including laptops, monitors, mice, mobile phones, suitable chairs, and remote access to the server where documents are stored. The suitability of employees' home spaces for healthy and safe work was confirmed through individual on-site inspections conducted by an authorized external occupational health and safety provider. In cases where the home environment becomes temporarily unsuitable for work due to renovations, power outages, or internet connectivity issues, employees can work from the office on those particular days. In October 2021, the Agency relocated to new premises, where the offices are designed for a maximum of two employees, providing a more comfortable and less disruptive work environment.

Implementing remote work has also brought communication and work organization changes within the Agency. To facilitate effective communication and collaboration, various tools and platforms are used. Employees regularly participate in Monday meetings via the Zoom application, allowing for virtual team discussions and updates. Departmental meetings are held weekly, either in person or through Zoom, depending on the hybrid work arrangement. Additionally, monthly meetings are organized between two departments to enhance collaboration and knowledge sharing. Further, every Wednesday morning, a "coffee chat" is held via Zoom to ensure equal participation for on-site and remote employees.

All meetings are scheduled in a shared calendar within the internal information system, iNakvis, to ensure better oversight and smooth coordination of responsibilities. This centralized calendar is a reference point for employees to stay informed about upcoming meetings and their respective agendas. Alongside traditional communication channels such as email and phone, employees also utilize instant messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram for swift information exchange, including dedicated work-related subgroups. Recognizing the need for a centralized information hub, a virtual bulletin board was established within the iNakvis system in 2023. This platform allows employees to share relevant news and updates. It also displays employees' presence in the office on any given day, providing visibility and promoting effective coordination. The adoption of mobile communication applications and the bulletin board's introduction have reduced email volume and minimized the risk of overlooking important information.

**CONCLUSION**

The Agency is committed to creating a professional and supportive environment for its employees. It adopts a comprehensive approach to professional development, offering various growth opportunities such as participation in domestic and international conferences, seminars, and workshops related to employees' respective fields of work (including legislation, ethics, IT, and finance) as well as topics of personal relevance (such as first aid, healthcare, and the use of chat GPT, among others). In the future, the Agency will continue providing opportunities for professional development. Regular surveys and discussions with the director help identify training needs and aspirations, ensuring that career growth opportunities align with individual goals and organizational requirements.

The Agency's awareness that a healthy work environment is crucial for employee well-being and professional growth is evident by obtaining the "Family-Friendly Enterprise" certificate and implementing measures that support work-life balance. The successful experience of remote work during the 2020 pandemic led to the introduction of a hybrid work model, allowing flexibility for employees while maintaining effective communication and collaboration. The health promotion team further contributes to a positive work environment by organizing activities promoting employees' physical and mental well-being.

As the Agency strives for excellence in higher education, it acknowledges that well-trained and motivated employees play a pivotal role in achieving this objective. By investing in employee development, enabling a healthy work environment, and aligning individual aspirations with organizational goals, the Agency is ready to continue its influential work in higher education and contribute to the progress of the Slovenian education system.

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# DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL COMPETENCE OF QA STAFF

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The importance of digital competence for effective living and working has gained increasing attention in today's society. This general competence is hard to overestimate, especially considering the recent experience of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, by „digital competence" we mean „the ability to solve problems that arise in a digital-enriched environment in one's (educational) work using digital technology" (Digital technology dictionary, 2021). There have been many theoretical frameworks developed to explore the nature and define the components of digital competence (see for example ISTE NETS[1], DigCompEdu[2]). However, the frameworks and models of implementation into practice are still not very clear.

One example of defining the components of digital competence of an educator and a learner is developed by the Estonian Education and Youth Board[3]. This model comprises the following components with sub-competences: (1) information and data literacy, (2) communication and cooperation in the digital environment, (3) creation of digital content, (4) digital security, and (5) troubleshooting. As the Quality Agency for Education, HAKA understands that not all the components are needed at an equal level from all the agency`s employees. There is a baseline to be defined – competences that are essential and needed for everyday work (for example, effective communication and cooperation in the digital environment). The ability to outsource the services (various systems and database developments, for instance) also requires the competence to be a smart and knowledgeable client.

At the individual employee level, the digital competence is discussed in the annual development interview. At the organisational level, the priority areas for the digital development are set based on the agency`s goals. For this year, these were defined as: raising the quality of self-analysis of the higher education institutions and raising the quality of the assessment reports. Accordingly, the model of expert training was reviewed and restructured, and interactive guidelines for experts were developed (see for example: Institutional Accreditation Guidelines for Experts[4]).

During this process, the guidance and help from the educational technologist, which is a part-time task of one of the staff members with the required qualification, has been most valuable. The digital developments have brought together colleagues who were more interested in developing specific digital skills, have been eager to gain and share experience in rethinking of experts' training and developing guidelines. This process certainly calls for leadership (educational technologist, in our case) and also needs to take into account the fact that not all members of the staff will necessarily feel the instant need to develop specific and advanced digital competence.

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1   https://www.iste.org/iste-standards

2   https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcompedu_en

3   https://digipadevus.ee/oppija-digipadevusmudel

4   https://rise.articulate.com/share/YuuRA72ObEsAovJp837cnrU3g7hEmHdi/#/

# DIGITALIZATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN UKRAINE

## NATALIIA STUKALO, NATIONAL AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE (NAQA), UKRAINE

The National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA) is a permanent collegial body authorized by the Law of Ukraine "On Higher Education" to implement the state policy in the field of higher education quality assurance. At the moment NAQA is the only higher education accreditation agency and its mission is to catalyse positive changes in higher education and to shape its quality culture.

NAQA Strategy approved in 2019 and updated in 2022 identifies the strategic goals in three main directions: Quality of educational services, recognition of the quality of scientific results and ensuring the systemic impact of the National Agency`s activities. It also defines values - partnership, innovation, responsibility, integrity, openness, transparency, independence, reliability, professionalism, demand, trust. To put into force NAQA's Strategy and achieve the goals, the digitalization of the accreditation process was implemented in 2019.

The NAQA IT system contains comprehensive information about all study programs and the accreditation process, as well as structures the communication with higher education institutions. It serves for launching the accreditation process initialized by a higher education institution, contains a list of all cases that is available to everyone via the agency's website[1]. The reports of expert groups based on the results of on-site, hybrid or online visits, the HEIs' self-assessment reports and other information analyses are entered in the system. Moreover, sectoral expert councils' reports (SEC) which verify the conclusion of an expert group are entered in the IT system as well. After SEC approval, a case is considered at a NAQA Board meeting. Information about the date, time and place of the meeting is entered in the system. According to the meeting outcomes, the decision of the NAQA board is available through the system. HEIs have access to all the reports and materials on the study program accreditation, and may submit any complaints, corrections or proposals at any stage of the process.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic the information system has been a powerful instrument to overcome the many obstacles. Nowadays it is a vital instrument of NAQA functioning in the conditions of Russia's full-scale war aggression despite the challenges such as remote team work, with members of the team working a hundred miles away from each other, relocation of HEIs, prolongation of online accreditation process. Owing to the information system, which is comprehensive, updated and flexible, NAQA stays operational and the team keeps working even in the conditions of full-scale war.

To sum up, the digitalization of the Ukrainian quality assurance system made the entire process transparent and clearly structured. Moreover, the use of the system simplified administrative processes, made communication between NAQA team, experts and HEIs faster, reduced the time for processing documents during the accreditation of study programs and made this process more flexible and innovative.

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1   https://en.naqa.gov.ua/