



The Strategy of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) 2017-2018

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Background

According to our current mission statement (December 2016), the HAC regards “the protection of the quality of Hungarian higher education, and the most complete fulfilment of the related needs of interested parties (higher education institutions, students, parents, users, government)” as its main goal.

In the next few years, HAC is going to face a major challenge, as it has to meet such expectations during its functioning in the changing national and international higher education landscape that, in order to maintain and consistently represent the values in these expectations, it requires a completely renewed and revised working method and methodology. This situation has led to the set objectives, which can be summarized in short (2017-2018) and long term (2018-2022) strategies. Therefore, our short term strategy should incorporate both the tasks that could not be completed and are still necessary in the current changing system, and new goals that reflect on programs targeting the qualitative reformation of higher education as well as on activities and expectations set by the legislation. The main goals of the two-year strategy are presented in this document and point further towards those priorities that require a longer time to perform, and thus can be considered as key points in the strategy to be prepared in 2018. The HAC performs its tasks, either defined in the legislation or self-initiated, as a public-benefit body, and its Board (the appointment of its members and president is regulated by law) is the top level decision maker. The application or rejection of the HAC decisions is decided by the Board of Appeals (BA) in the framework of a separate procedure, following an appeal, performed according to the relevant legislation. The operations and financial management of the HAC is supervised by the Financial Supervisory Committee (FSC), formed according to the delegation and appointment rules set up in the law. The staff of the HAC Secretariat assists the work of other units of the HAC (Board, BA, FSC)

¹Our Strategy for 2017-2018 is built upon the previous and current recommendations of the national and international advisory bodies of HAC (NAB and IAB, 28 October 2016), and also on the conclusions included in the interim evaluation (2015) of reviewing the HAC’s ENQA membership, the analysis of the implementation of the 2013-2015 Strategy, and the suggestions set by the ad hoc Strategy Committee (established in June 2016), evaluated by the HAC by September 2016.

composed of designated members, and also of the expert commissions comprising members elected by the Board, with operations-related administrative tasks.

We expect a significant increase in the volume of tasks because of the expectations towards experts and accreditation procedures included in the new legislation (Act On National Higher Education, Government Decree on Doctoral Regulations, education and outcome requirements, operating licenses issued by the Hungarian Educational Authority, etc.) based on the Ministry's strategy for Hungarian higher education ("Changing gears in higher education"), and due to Hungary's signed commitment to introduce the ESG 2015. We can project new and renewed tasks, a rising demand for high quality expertise, and also an increased expectation for accreditation. The renewal of methodologies, increasing resources, strengthening international relations and involving expert support, that is, a re-interpretation of the function and role of HAC are all necessary to properly ensure the professionalism of our activities, our independent operation, efficiency and quality. Thus the expectations set for the HAC by itself should also appear in our Mission Statement. HAC activities and the fulfilment of our mission can be derived from the tasks and value framework as stated above.

The new Mission Statement of HAC

The main task of HAC is to evaluate and foster high level teaching and learning in Hungarian higher education institutions, and to deliver quality assurance that supports each level and each participant of higher education. During its operation, HAC considers the legislation on higher education, performs its dedicated tasks, complies with the criteria set in the ESG 2015, and applies the objective, complex and up-to-date criteria developed by the HAC expert commissions and Board. With its activities, HAC reinforces its independent operation, and applies, develops and/or adapts a methodology in evaluation in line with international standards. HAC expert activities, accreditation, analysis and decision-making are built on an objective criteria framework, all activities are independent, unbiased, non-political, and follow the principal values set out in international standards. HAC seeks to enhance the internal quality culture of higher education institutions with its activities, thus helping to improve the quality of Hungarian higher education and its international recognition.

When performing its tasks, HAC consistently applies the quality assurance criteria set down in the ESG 2015 and the values held by ENQA:

- (1) *transparency*: HAC publishes its decisions and the principles its analyses are based on, discloses its resolutions and the criteria used in decision making and analysis;
- (2) *independence*: independent operation ensures the quality and recognition of the HAC's work, while institutional independence ensures the respect and support for the autonomy of higher education institutions;
- (3) *cooperation*: HAC regularly consults the stakeholders of higher education, cooperates with higher education representative organizations, partner organizations in quality assurance, and key international organizations;
- (4) *integrity*: during its operation, HAC acts in an irreproachable, just, fair, impartial, objective and professional way.

Major objectives and planned actions of HAC

Among the strategic objectives for the years 2017 and 2018, the following are given high priority:

- defining the tasks required for further improving the quality assurance system for Hungarian higher education;
- re-evaluating and re-interpreting the role and functions of HAC;
- translating the new approach into daily tasks; updating the methodology;
- assessing the compliance with the ESG 2015;
- renewing our cooperation and partnerships in national and international higher education .

I. The new role of HAC in the complex system of the quality assurance of higher education

Objective

The main goal of HAC for this strategic time period is to develop a complex systemic-level approach in the practice of quality assurance that helps the quality improvement and international integration of Hungarian higher education, and also to strengthen the professional role and recognition of HAC as well as its operational independence.

The areas for the practical realization of this goal:

- (1) balanced evaluation of our professional and higher education quality assurance-related activities, developing a new methodology, criteria framework, and procedures for checking quality compliance
- (2) adapting accreditation procedures to accommodate the legislative requirements regarding the activities and operations of HAC (legislation on higher education and quality assurance, ESG 2015)
- (3) developing new methods for introducing different types of institutional procedures (accreditation, reaccreditation, audit)
- (4) providing our opinion about draft legislations on higher education and the quality of higher education, performing thematic analyses
- (5) establishing and communicating self-initiated, specific professional and conceptual positions
- (6) introducing services for higher education institutions (advise, training, etc.)

Rationale

In the government strategy for quality development in higher education, quality assurance gets a stronger emphasis compared to past practice, and this requires deeper, computable evaluation methods to be implemented in the HAC expert activity, compliance assessments (accreditation), and complementary or follow-up evaluations (monitor, re-accreditation, audit), which can support quality assessment with quantitative data and can be summarized in a clear expert opinion (Board decision). The new system needs to be able to adapt to the changed expectations and a predictably greater volume of tasks; more rigorous criteria for compliance must be implemented in the very near future.

The elements that serve to underpin the HAC's consolidation comprise a clear and up-to-date professional framework of quality criteria and practice in quality evaluation activities, in reference to international quality assurance practices and requisites, the internal harmonization of our principles on compliance and our practices, and the degree to which we comply with the ESG 2015.

Actions

(1) Applying a balanced practice in the professional evaluation and quality assessment of conditions for education and training programs provided at higher education institutions, renewing the criteria framework of compliance checking, developing and implementing new evaluation criteria, methodologies and procedures.

- a. **Improving the criteria framework of accreditation**, establishing a compliance evaluation system for assessing output criteria (outcome requirements) with equal importance given to the criteria framework for assessing the implementation of input criteria (training requirements) for evaluating skills, competencies, and learning outcomes according to the levels of training.
- b. **Assigning more prominence to processes** when applying input and outcome indicators in evaluation. In the case of input elements, the methodology and procedures for process analysis (on teaching and recommended learning processes, improving the curriculum, supporting talented students, teacher-student relationships, student assessment, catching-up training for incoming students, causes for drop-outs, etc.) have to be elaborated.
- c. Elaborating the evaluation criteria for outcome elements both within the new criteria framework and for the evaluation of their implementation (acquirable/acquired learning outcomes and competencies, national and international job placement of graduates /referencing with the graduate tracking system "DPR" /, feedback from employers, research findings). Legislation requires higher education institutions to establish and implement outcome requirements while the principles for external quality assurance by accreditation boards or agencies are set by the ESG 2015. Evaluating compliance through outcome indicators calls for a new

methodology that comprises universal aspects, applicable to all kinds of institutions, and distinctive evaluation criteria for different institution types. The development and implementation of a differentiated criteria framework is necessary both in the accreditation of institutions and programs.

- d. **It is necessary to expand the HAC's evaluation criteria** in order to take the changed context of higher education into account. It needs to be explored how the availability and usefulness of flexible modes of learning, and the use of non-traditional materials, learning and teaching methods (online materials, etc.) in training programs can be taken into account during evaluation.

(2) Adapting accreditation procedures to accommodate the expectations towards the HAC's activities and operations (legislation on higher education and quality assurance, ESG 2015).

- a. **Improving the methodology of quality assessment** to increase the quality of analysis, the thoroughness of checking compliance, and the effectiveness of the procedures. In addition to formally complying with the legislation and its changes, and the expectations regarding accreditation, a practice has to be established that promotes substantial improvement of the quality of training and education, and also the continuous, stable and appropriate maintenance of internal quality assurance systems independent from the accreditation procedure. To achieve this, the following quality assessment tools should be applied, among others: random sampling, random checks for gathering information on the spot (e.g. visiting lectures, comparison of actually performed lectures with the curriculum, gathering information from discussions with teachers and students, etc.).
- b. **A consistent application of criteria for academic staff, developing this criteria framework**, and establishing categories for written decisions. Regarding academic staff, and university professor applications in particular, the quality criteria should be applied consistently for each institution type.

- c. **Criteria and assessment method for evaluating the activities of professional practitioners with active participation in training.** The criteria and procedures for evaluating academic staff at higher education institutions and/or at practical training sites and how they can be considered as part of the staff requirements should be developed. Criteria applied during the accreditation of institutions have to be stated in a clear and specific manner, developed also for student, teacher, and institutional evaluations at universities of applied sciences and in dual training programs.
- d. **Consistent implementation, strengthening and improvement of previously set compliance criteria in the recently restructured doctoral training.** Constantly raising the quality and quantity of scientific staff supply is part of the higher education strategy of the government. To this end, a government decree went into effect on the 1st of September 2016 that changed doctoral training (from three- to four-year programs) and scholarships. While keeping its existing evaluation system, HAC has to introduce new indicators and methods of analysis in the evaluation of doctoral training and the core academic staff and heads of doctoral schools. When evaluating doctoral training, HAC should aim to enhance the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. Therefore, it is a prominent objective in the 2017-2018 HAC Strategy to set the conditions for such an external evaluation system, and to promote it so that it becomes accepted. An aim in this two-year strategic period is to extend the methodology and conditions for conducting accreditation of doctoral schools in English language (similarly to the current practice in the evaluation of university professor applications).

(3) Elaborating methods for the introduction of different types of institutional evaluation procedures (accreditation, reaccreditation, audit).

- a. Updating institutional accreditation procedures is timely and necessary, with particular attention to the experiences gained in the three previous institutional accreditation cycles. According to the decisions of the HAC Board, the accreditation outcomes can be positive, conditional, or negative,

that is, accredited for 5 years, requiring interim monitoring procedure, or withdrawing the accreditation. An increasingly common practice by higher education quality assurance agencies is to apply a tailored evaluation approach.

- b. **During the first 6 months in the implementation of this strategy, the tailored system for institutional evaluation has to be developed.** Within this, instead of the 4th cycle of accreditation, a new procedure should be developed, based more on the results of previous accreditations; a simplified procedure (audit) could be applied in case of higher education institutions that were evaluated positively, while an in-depth procedure (reaccreditation, or complete accreditation) is required for institutions that failed to meet the conditions evaluated in a monitoring process or whose accreditation has been withdrawn.
- c. **Within the framework of program accreditation, the possibility of a new, modern practical approach, namely risk-based evaluation has to be assessed.** Risk-based evaluation for program reaccreditation is under development or already implemented by several European quality assurance organizations. The HAC should examine the possibility of initiating cooperation with institutions that use such a similar, effective approach in their accreditation practice. The elements of risk-based program evaluation (student questionnaires, indicators of individual learning results, content, structure, and coherence of education programs, evaluation of student complaints) should be applied in a well-balanced way. In working out a risk-based program evaluation methodology, it is necessary to consider the preconditions and legal background of possible unscheduled reaccreditation visits by the HAC. It might be useful to elaborate the legal consequences of repeated non-compliance.
- d. **To perform cluster accreditation of programs by disciplines it is vital to renew the evaluation methodology.** Risk-based program evaluation is a new option in this regard as well and would be more effective than the current system used by HAC. In the framework of international cooperation, the HAC should adapt methodologies that reduce the evaluation time and the required resources. Under the HAC's present

conditions, disciplinary cluster accreditation of programs can be carried out in the form of a simplified procedure.

- e. **As the expert activities of the HAC are expanding in 2017 to review the operating licenses of higher education institutions for the Hungarian Educational Authority, it is necessary to investigate the existing conditions for this task.** The HAC expert opinion requested in this procedure relies on multiple components (assessment of former evaluations and accreditation decisions, supplementary expert opinion, etc.). Thus, the methods to be applied and the HAC's own criteria and order of procedures are to be developed. The methodology and feasibility of compiling HAC expert opinions for operating licenses that demand the joint work of the HAC and the Hungarian Educational Authority should be done in a pilot procedure. The criteria, content, form and conditions (human resources, financial, and IT) for expert evaluation need to be assessed. The pilot procedure has to be started without delay.

(4) Providing an expert opinion about draft legislation regarding and concerning higher education, performing thematic analyses

- a. **HAC gives its opinion on draft legislations regarding higher education,** and draws up a position on proposed legislative changes and measures that affect higher education on its own initiative, particularly regarding the quality assurance of higher education.
- b. **In presenting its opinions, the HAC Board is fundamentally affected by the often short deadlines.** Thematic analyses, conducted by the Board within its own area of competence may contribute to alleviating this situation. Working groups should be created to summarize the initial experiences gained during the transformation process of higher education, which would participate in preparing analyses on various topics for supporting quality assurance.

(5) We need to establish the thematic priorities in the preparation of self-initiated, specific professional and conceptual standpoints at HAC. A more effective communication of positions and standpoints concluded by the Board has to be developed.

(6) It is necessary to introduce services into the activities of the HAC that could be provided for higher education institutions (advising, training, etc.). This is also true for communicating and promoting the principles of quality assurance, and the training of accreditation officers at institutions. For this, we need to improve our human resources, secure financial resources, improve organizational and IT support, and initiate participation in training programs provided by ENQA.

II. National and international relations of HAC

Objective

The HAC's cooperation and partnerships have to be enhanced, and by increasing transparency and reliability the reputation and recognition of the HAC needs to be raised. HAC should increase its activity in international quality assurance organizations and in establishing and improving international, mutually beneficial partnerships.

Rationale

HAC is an active participant in the quality transformation of higher education and, at the same time, it is an assistant and consultant in the development of internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions. The tasks set for HAC by the new legislation on higher education (Act on National Higher Education, Government Decree on Doctoral Regulations, issuing operating licenses) can be promoted via discussion forums, and supported through stronger relations with higher education institutions. In the introduction of the ESG 2015 in Hungary, it is important to have certified membership in renowned and competent international organizations and to use their support. The rapid and high-standard reformation of the HAC methodologies can be carried out by establishing cooperation with a range of international institutions/agencies with advanced quality assurance practices.

Actions

- (1) HAC nurtures and strengthens its relations with national organizations who determine the function and management of higher education (the Ministry of Human Capacities, the Hungarian Rector's Conference, the Hungarian Doctoral Council, the Higher Education and Scientific Council, the Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Students, the National Union of Students in Hungary), and ensures that these organizations are represented regularly in the meetings of inviting organizations. In addition to inviting them to the open session of the Board meetings, HAC consults regularly with the relevant organizations and initiates meetings and discussions.

- (2) HAC organizes forums that allow the accreditation officers, teachers and staff of higher education institutions to exchange ideas. The financial basis for organizing these forums appears as an objective in the budget of HAC.
- (3) The national and international acceptance of HAC needs to be enhanced. We have to make efforts to keep the full ENQA membership of the HAC, recognized again in 2015, and to get another renewal for 5 years by implementing our strategic goals. The full membership of the HAC will be reviewed by ENQA in 2018.
- (4) In case of full compliance with the ESG 2015 criteria, which is a possible and targeted result of the ENQA review, the registration process in EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education) shall be initiated.
- (5) HAC initiates or strengthens its contacts with international peer agencies, and promotes the exchange of experiences, projects that aim to update the methodology of quality assurance, joint expert work supporting external evaluation, and cooperation in quality assessment processes.
- (6) It is a priority for HAC that Hungarian higher education complies with international standards, and that it is a recognized and acknowledged, constituent of international higher education. HAC supports the internationalization of higher education through its national relations, with its external quality assurance expertise, and also by involving international experts in its own quality assessment procedures.

III. Organizational and operational coherence and conditions of the HAC

Objective

For the independent operation of HAC, we have to ensure its organizational and operational coherence, review the approaches and conditions for potential cooperation partners, explore new possibilities to raise resources (professional, financial, human), identify the tasks that require increased resources, with particular attention on the increasing demand of expert activities and national/international commitments.

Rationale

HAC operates as a non-profit, public benefit organization. The custodians of the professional work that is the foundation of quality assurance are the expert commissions and the Board. The performance of the experts involved in the quality assurance activities of HAC is uneven, review opinions often extend to generalities and thus are not helpful for the expert commissions in forming their evaluation proposals. They also fail to provide sufficient support for decisions made by the Board (this is particularly critical in case of negative decisions). Therefore the Secretariat is loaded with tasks that exceed the professional competence of its officers. The currently available resources are not sufficient to support the Secretariat in its increased work demand and to secure the necessary quality of its performance.

Actions

- (1) **The framework for the more effective cooperation between the Board and the Secretariat has to be established.** For improving the multifaceted competencies of the Secretariat, further training is necessary, in order to prepare for the implementation of new quality assurance methodologies. The expertise of Board members in their domain or field of study must be coupled with the methodological competencies in quality assurance, so that the academic expert opinions, quality assurance judgements and knowledge about the legislation on quality assurance are treated as a whole. The provisions for the ESG 2015 compliance require further professional training within the HAC, and also the participation in ENQA training programs. For this, we need to build up financial and human resources with high level professional competence and language skills.
- (2) **It is necessary to refresh the HAC database of experts.** Currently, both its size and the scope of information managed within the system makes it unsuitable to support

the increasing professional responsibilities and tasks of HAC, which we aim to renew. The expert database has to be reviewed within the shortest possible time, with special regard to the recommendations of the HAC's International Advisory Board that has not been fulfilled.

- (3) **A pool of external experts, who are to be involved in the HAC's work in giving opinions and evaluations, should be established.** One precondition for this is the use of English in the evaluation process, which is already established in university professor applications. However, the Board should agree on the procedure of appointing the expert pool. Inviting the members of the external expert pool, and developing the relevant database requires different levels of professional competence and language skills from the Board and the Secretariat. The pool of external experts involved in the evaluation of university professor applications can form the starting basis of the English-language accreditation of doctoral schools that we aim to introduce.
- (4) **The scheduling and pre-planning of HAC tasks has to be reviewed.** A new system for scheduling expert commission meetings has to be established, which considers the deadlines for sending the documents related to the Board Meeting when including issues in the agenda that require quick decision-making. The ability to pre-plan activities improves the working quality of the Secretariat when preparing decisions, as it allows reviewing previous decisions and checking the compliance with the rules of quality assurance.
- (5) **The current structure of expert commissions (determined by a repealed legislation) has to be reviewed, together with the compliance and appropriateness of the disciplinary nomenclature.** In this analysis, it is worth to consider among other factors the number of cases assigned to each expert commission, the representation of disciplines, and the discrepancies between evaluations in different fields of studies, related to different expert commissions.
- (6) **The obligation of reconciliation has to be forced and upheld in organizations delegating new members to the HAC Board.** This can be encouraged by information exchange with relevant stakeholders. The Act on National Higher Education requires only that the delegating bodies consult with each other but not about the means of this consultation (the appointment of the president of the HAC has to be agreed between the president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and

the Minister of Human Capacities). We have to explore how to fulfil the expectation that the expert representation of each discipline and field of education is ensured in the Board as far as possible.

- (7) **The human resources of the Secretariat have to be expanded in order to perform the increasing and qualitatively new tasks of HAC.** A prerequisite to realize this is a comparative analysis of the necessary and available workforce, and the assessment of trainability. Based on this, we can plan the active recruitment and hiring of employees with the missing professional profile and competences, ensure a reliable order of substitution, establish the competencies required for new tasks, and also provide a supply to replace the significant number of employees who work while in retirement.
- (8) **It is necessary to clearly identify the place, tasks, function, and the role of the Secretariat within the HAC.** This requires the review of the By-Laws from the aspect of coherence, and also the review of the content of each chapter regarding the references for eligible and repealed legislation. We have to review the work organization, order of positions, task performance and control system, management levels and methods. During this organizational review, the concordance of different-level legislation of pertaining to the organizational structure and operation of HAC.
- (9) **The functioning of the electronic case management and review system (“TIR”) - developed by the Secretariat - has to be reviewed,** assessing its compatibility with other databases, with particular regards to the electronic management of mandatory HAC expert opinions issued upon request of the Hungarian Educational Authority. We have to assess the prerequisites of an authentication process for submitting HAC decisions in an electronic form.
- (10) **We need to evaluate the suitability of the IT system available at the Secretariat to manage the increasing demands of data management and analysis,** the advances in IT technologies since the development of the “TIR” electronic system, the potential deficits and the professional and financial requirements for its update. Regarding the objectives stated in the higher education strategy and in the Digital Education Strategy, analyzing the possibilities of IT modernization of quality assurance, the compatibility of different databases and the new technological opportunities (transportable student data, e-degree, etc.) are needed.

(11) **It is necessary to continuously renew the Secretariat's** IT system and hardware, to create a new homepage for the HAC (the current one cannot be developed), and to enlarge the staff performing IT tasks.

(12) **The set of management conditions at the HAC are to be revised.** It is the president's task to initiate timely negotiations about the budget, and to ensure that the funding is transferred at the beginning of the fiscal year. The budgetary framework of the HAC has to include the operational budget providing the stable operation of the HAC, and also the distinct earmarked funds (for staff enlargement, training, international relations, IT development, etc.).

The 2017-2018 Strategy of the HAC should emphasize and reinforce the long-term objectives that are to serve as a foundation for our next strategy to be developed in 2018.

The Strategy have been accepted unanimously by the Board at its meeting of 9 December 2016.

Valéria Csépe (signed)

President