



## **Framework for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of National Accreditation Bureau for Higher Education's Activities**

In compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the National Accreditation Bureau for Higher Education (NAB) has established procedures for internal quality assurance of its activities. Just as it takes care of the quality of educational activities of higher education institutions (HEIs), it is also essential for NAB itself to formulate a basic framework for internal quality assurance and to critically reflect on its activities in a regular internal evaluation process. NAB understands internal quality assurance as setting up its activities so that it can effectively fulfil its role described in the Higher Education Act, achieve its goals formulated in the mission statement and play its social role. The Framework for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of NAB's Activities is based on an analysis of the NAB's role and the conditions needed to fulfil it. This document represents a vision that NAB strives for.

### Mission statement of NAB and its fulfilment

According to the Higher Education Act, NAB is an independent body that deals with quality assurance of higher education, takes decisions in administrative proceedings on accreditation of degree programmes, accreditation of fields of procedure towards appointment of associate professors and professors, and institutional accreditation, carries out audits of compliance with legal regulations at HEIs as well as external review of educational, creative and other related activities of HEIs. The social role of NAB is to evaluate the quality of higher education in an expert, qualified manner and with an emphasis on feedback, which will enable HEIs to improve their quality. NAB supports public, state as well as private HEIs in the development of their internal quality assurance systems. The systems must create a framework for independent incentives that will foster a high and sustainable level of education and other activities. Respecting the academic tradition in the Czech Republic and the legal framework, NAB acknowledges the primary responsibility of HEIs and their academic communities for the quality of educational, creative and other related activities.

NAB fulfils its social roles mainly by taking decisions on accreditation of degree programmes, fields of procedure towards appointment of associate professors and professors and institutional accreditation, as well as by assessing their quality in the external review procedure and the audit procedure. In addition, it makes wider analysis on the system level that should be based on its summary findings and gained knowledge in the field of higher education. Based on the analysis, NAB gives suggestions and recommendations for further development of higher education and its quality assurance.

NAB is inspired by quality assurance models in the European Higher Education Area, in which it represents the Czech system of external quality assurance and cooperates with quality assurance agencies in other countries. NAB acts in a responsible, open and transparent manner in all matters related to accreditation and quality assurance processes and considers representatives of HEIs, students, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, employer

organizations, the Labour Union in Higher Education and other representatives of industry to be its natural partners. Mutual trust and dialogue are a key tool in the process of assuring a high quality in higher education in the Czech Republic.

In order to achieve the NAB's goals, several aspects of its activities require high and permanent attention. It is necessary for NAB to not only comply with its legal obligations and legal norms, but also to fulfil its social role. Therefore, the output of its activities must be a qualified expert assessment of quality that enhances the development of HEIs. NAB must act according to good governance principles and apply administrative discretion in its decision-making. It follows legal regulations as well as its own rules and procedures, which it has independently established in order to maintain consistency and transparency of its activities. Transparency and openness are thus some of the main principles of its activities and should lead to the fulfilment of the principle of accountability. Feedback and communication within NAB and its bodies as well as with its natural partners (stakeholders) or with the community of experts play a key role. Regular evaluation of essential parts of NAB's activities and monitoring of their progress over time are essential elements of internal quality assurance. The internal evaluation and the external review of NAB enable a reformulation of objectives, or setting of new ones to increase the quality of its activities, considering the findings from the critical analysis of its functioning and the changing external circumstances. In this regard, NAB has laid down specific procedures aimed at improving quality and enhancing the fulfilment of its role. This model of internal quality assurance and evaluation has been developed with regard to the NAB's mission. Achieving full implementation of the model is a continuous process.

#### Methods of ensuring and monitoring compliance with external and internal rules

NAB carries out its tasks in accordance with the Higher Education Act, related government regulations (especially on standards for accreditation), the Administrative Procedure Code and its Statute approved by the government. Its activities comply with legal norms and regulations. The legal requirements and standards for accreditation should be applied consistently and on the basis of rational consideration, while following the principle that similar cases are treated in a similar way in order to fulfil legitimate expectations of HEIs.

To perform these tasks, NAB sets its own procedures and criteria and complies with them. When assessing applications for accreditation and evaluating HEIs, NAB follows its **methodical guidelines**. The methodical guidelines related to quality assurance activities carried out by NAB undergo **regular revision** and are updated as needed to reflect the dynamic development of higher education as well as to incorporate recent experience and external and internal critical feedback. To facilitate this knowledge transfer, NAB continuously seeks and evaluates feedback within its bodies (the Board, the Pool of Evaluators, the Appeals Committee, the Office) and among its stakeholders.

In relation to the regular revision of methodical guidelines and procedures, NAB submits suggestions for **amendment of** secondary legislation (mainly standards for accreditation) or legal norms when relevant. The suggestions should reflect experience with the implementation of the new system of quality assurance in higher education. In doing so, NAB will pay attention to the highest possible degree of compliance of the methodical guidelines and secondary legislation/by-norms, resp. legal norms with the ESG.

**The screening of the received applications** by the Office of NAB contributes to better compliance with NAB's formal requirements on the form and content of applications. This

check identifies formal shortcomings of applications and allows for their remedy prior to their assessment by evaluation committees. Moreover, it helps make the assessment process quicker and more effective. The Office of NAB also provides **expert and administrative support** to evaluation committees, thus creating better conditions for compliance with formal requirements on the form and content of outputs from the committees. In addition, it contributes to harmonization of assessment criteria.

Evaluators enrolled in the Pool of Evaluators must be thoroughly acquainted with the assessment procedures, standards and their application. For this purpose, NAB creates methodical guidelines and also systematically **trains persons enrolled in the Pool of Evaluators**. Introductory trainings organized by the Office take place continuously. Special attention is paid to the training of evaluators in the field of institutional accreditation. Subsequently, NAB enables and supports exchange of experience and discussions among evaluators.

Evaluation committees established by NAB as advisory bodies according to the Higher Education Act and the Statute are essential for the NAB's activities. Their operations are regulated by the **Rules of Procedure for Evaluation Committees** and other documents that specify the roles and rules of their activities.

### Transparency

Legal norms that regulate NAB's activities as well as standards for accreditation and all other methodical guidelines developed by NAB are available to the stakeholders and the general public on its website. NAB also **publishes its decisions in administrative proceedings** and minutes from meetings of the Board. Reports on external review of HEIs and other activities carried out by NAB as a body acting in the public interest will also be published. Furthermore, NAB publishes a continuously updated extract from the Pool of Evaluators that contains the data required by the Higher Education Act for each evaluator (e.g. occupation and areas of expertise). Similar type of information and other information when relevant are published also about members of the Board and the Appeals Committee for the sake of transparency.

In addition, NAB also makes reports on its activities available to the public, that is its **annual reports** with an overview of activities and statistical data as well as **internal evaluation reports**. The self-assessment of NAB and the final evaluation report by the international expert panel created for external review of compliance with the ESG will also be published, as is required by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The main tool for publication is the NAB's website (<https://www.nauvs.cz/index.php/en/>), which should be managed in a way to maximize its user-friendliness. Essential data and documents are also available in English. The information required by law is also published on the NAB's official notice board.

### Communication

As a part of its internal quality assurance, NAB has established **the basic line of communication** with its natural partners (stakeholders), mainly with HEIs. The Presidium and the Office provide consultations on procedural issues of administrative proceedings and formal requirements on applications for accreditation. They also answer general enquiries

about requirements of the law and the standards for accreditation as well as their interpretation by NAB. However, they do not comment on the content of individual applications for accreditation and do not make assessments of (non)compliance with the standards in individual cases. Members of evaluation committees appointed for assessment of applications for accreditation do not communicate with applicants beyond requests for additional documents needed in order to complete the assessment.

The Chair and members of the Board can communicate with applicants about the content of applications and compliance with legal regulations and standards for applications, but as a rule, they do not provide consultations before the Board takes a decision on the application. Discussions with HEIs mainly revolve around conceptual issues, solutions to serious problems in the activities of HEIs, etc. The Chair of NAB should be informed about all meetings of the members of the Board with applicants. The Board as a body fulfils its general consultative role by specifying requirements on applications for accreditation and interpreting ambiguous items in the standards for accreditation. Respective resolutions are always included in the minutes from the Board's meetings and are continuously incorporated into relevant methodical guidelines.

Guests may **attend meetings of the Board** in accordance with the Statute. Representatives of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and members of bodies of representation of HEIs are invited to the public part of the meetings that does not involve administrative proceedings or any other issues related to individual HEIs. When an application for institutional accreditation is on the agenda, representatives of the applicant are present at the meeting before the Board proceeds to vote on the application. In the case of specific items on the agenda, possible invitation of other guests is at the discretion of the Chair of NAB. Off-site meetings of the Board, which usually take place several times a year, provide a good opportunity for strategic discussions, sharing of experience and reflections on NAB's activities.

Members of the bodies of NAB, which include members of the Board, members of the Appeals Committee and persons enrolled in the Pool of Evaluators, follow **the Code of Ethics of NAB** in all activities related to quality assurance of higher education. The Code of Ethics emphasizes the principles of objectivity, transparency, professionalism, accountability, personal integrity and independence and rules out any undue influence resulting from conflict of interests, corruption or discrimination. It also applies to the staff of the Office, who are additionally subject to the Code of Ethics of Civil Servants and Employees of Public Administration.

### Feedback

NAB should systematically obtain feedback on its activities from its bodies (the Board, the Pool of Evaluators, the Appeals Committee, the Office) as well as from its natural partners (stakeholders). The **feedback mechanism** from each group should be laid down and consistently applied in order to regularly seek and analyse critical suggestions within NAB and from its stakeholders.

The initiated feedback can be **thematically focused on specific aspects of NAB's activities** to enable more detailed analysis. The analysis of feedback must lead to adoption of measures aimed at improving any shortcomings, revising rules and procedures, and harmonizing the administrative practice. Continuous reflection that comes from members of the academic community as well as other actors from the community of experts is also considered. The

feedback mechanism includes systematic transfer of knowledge and experience to individual groups of actors.

An effective feedback mechanism creates opportunities for improvement, revision of criteria and methods and emphasizes good practice that can be built upon. The feedback and internal evaluation of NAB's activities can also result in an incentive to amend the law or secondary legislation, given that the current quality assurance system in higher education was created relatively recently and is only gradually being put into practice.

Informal feedback received outside the formal feedback process is also important in relation to the natural partners (stakeholders). It is obtained mainly through **regular communication between NAB and its key partners**. Members of the bodies of representation of the HEIs attend meetings of the Board and similarly, representatives of NAB occasionally speak at meetings of the bodies of representation and meet with the management of HEIs, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and other institutions. Informal feedback is also obtained through discussions at seminars and conferences that the representatives of NAB participate in and speak at.

Further development and improvement of NAB's activities will also benefit from paying increased attention to the application of the ESG and using the experience of other quality assurance agencies. **Strengthening international relations and involvement in international activities** will bring valuable insights and good practice examples that can be used in reflection on NAB's activities.

#### Internal evaluation and external review

In compliance with the ESG and the Statute, NAB carries out regular **internal evaluation** every three years with yearly updates. It focuses on the reflection of key aspects of NAB's activities and proposes measures aimed at achieving goals related to fulfilling the NAB's mission. Internal evaluation provides space for periodic assessment of experience and monitoring of progress over time through analysis of implementation of recommendations and actions planned in previous evaluations. It is directly connected to previous evaluations and captures gradual implementation of previous recommendations. Consideration of the ESG through analysis of the level of the NAB's compliance (in international comparison) is crucial. After the external review of NAB will have taken place, it will be necessary to reflect also the recommendations of the international expert panel. The internal evaluation and the related reporting are managed, as the Statute stipulates, by designated members of the Board supported by the Office.

Continuity of gradual implementation of recommendations that will be formulated by NAB in its internal evaluations and that come out of analysis of compliance with the ESG is essential. NAB also needs to identify specific topics to analyse in each period to provide truly useful reflection and concrete suggestions to improve the concerned aspects of NAB's activities. The procedure of internal evaluation and the structure of related reports should allow for both approaches that are complementary and reinforce each other. Utmost openness, ability to critically reflect, acceptance of diverse feedback and ability to work with the NAB's own strengths and weaknesses are key to an effective internal evaluation.

The basic structure of internal evaluation:

1. Definition of aims and context of the internal evaluation (connection to the previous ones, relation to the external review, justification of the thematic focus for the given period)
2. Assessment of fulfilment of the set goals and recommendations (previous outputs from the internal evaluation and external review, analysis of compliance with the ESG)
3. Detailed analysis of specific aspects of NAB's activities
4. Conclusions and recommendations

NAB undergoes an **external review** of compliance with the ESG every five years, which is also a precondition for full membership in ENQA and international recognition of NAB as a quality assurance agency and of the outputs from its activities. An international panel of trained experts will evaluate NAB's activities through an analysis of its self-assessment report and a site visit lasting several days that will consist mainly of meetings with NAB's representatives and stakeholders. The self-assessment is a complex process in which a wide spectrum of actors within NAB and among stakeholders must be involved.

*The relation between the internal evaluation and the external review:*

Internal quality assurance means that NAB creates its own internal mechanisms to monitor and assess the quality of its activities. Internal evaluation thus constitutes an important mechanism of internal quality assurance and serves mainly to set goals leading to fulfilment of the NAB's mission as well as gradual measures to achieve these goals. At the same time, internal evaluation provides a basis for external review especially with regards to preparation of the self-assessment report. Self-assessment serves to capture progress in a longer period of time than internal evaluation and it is also a process more complex in terms of extent and direct involvement of various actors. As the next step, evaluation by international experts on quality assurance in higher education will give NAB a critical insight into its activities from the outside and in international comparison. The expert panel will evaluate the NAB's internal quality assurance among other things. NAB acknowledges that critical, analytical, realistic and open internal evaluation as well as self-assessment in the external review process are crucial for improvement of its activities. It is in no way a formal matter. Conclusions and recommendations from these two evaluation processes will lead to concrete measures that must translate into everyday operations of NAB.

The Framework for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of NAB's Activities was approved by the Board of NAB according to Article 3, par. 1 n) of the Statute on 22 November 2018.