Higher education in the Republic of Croatia is delivered within university and professional study programmes. University study programmes qualify students to work in science and higher education, private and public sectors, and society in general, as well as to develop and apply scientific and professional knowledge. Professional study programmes provide students with an appropriate level of knowledge and skills required to work in applied professions, as well as direct integration into the working process. Development of binary higher education system initiated polycentric development of professional studies in Croatia, enabling access to higher education to prospective students living outside bigger city centres.

The higher education system in Croatia has undergone a comprehensive reform within the framework of the Bologna Process. According to stipulations of the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education of 2003 all study programmes were restructured in accordance with the principles of Bologna process introducing 3 study cycles, transfer of ECTS and diploma supplement. In the 2005/2006 academic year reformed study programmes were introduced and students could no longer enrol in pre-Bologna programmes. Also this Act increased the level of university autonomy. University autonomy at all higher education institutions includes: stipulating internal organisation; establishing educational, scientific, artistic and professional programs; financial autonomy and other forms of autonomy.

Educational requirements for admission into study programmes are set by higher education institutions. In the past the admissions process to first cycle programmes at Croatian universities required students to present their secondary school grades and take an entrance examination. Since 2010, instead of individual entrance exams, most Croatian universities use the new national examinations administered at the end of secondary school (State Matura). The National Information System for Administration of Admissions Applications in Higher Education became the central service for administering the State Matura as part of the process of enrolment into higher education in Croatia.

**Quality Assurance in Croatian Higher Education**

Further integration of the Croatian higher education system with the European Higher Education Area places emphasis on external and internal quality assurance. In the light of this, the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education was enacted in April 2009, tasking the Agency for Science and Higher Education with external quality assurance processes in Croatia.

Study programs delivered at public universities are self-accredited by university senates, while programs delivered by private higher education institutions, polytechnics or schools of professional higher education are accredited by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE). Public
universities apply for public financing of newly accredited programs at the ASHE. The Directory of Study Programs, published on the ASHE website, was created with the aim to provide a one-stop-shop for information on all levels of accredited study programs available in the Republic of Croatia.

Public HEIs other than universities (polytechnics and colleges), and all private HEIs need to submit proposals of their study programs to ASHE which subsequently starts the accreditation procedure within eight days and arranges a peer review team to evaluate the proposed program. Following the opinion of the peer review team, the ASHE within 60 days recommends whether the Minister of Education should issue a license or not (this is a formal arrangement and the MSES is obliged to accept the ASHE recommendations and decisions). These programs are also subject to cyclical re-accreditation every five years. In the case of accreditation of new institutions, all such proposals must include an agreement with an already accredited HEI about the joint provision of an already accredited study program. After a period of two years, the new institution may apply for independent awarding of qualifications. The Agency for Science and HE then appoints a peer review team to evaluate the proposal and submit its accreditation decision to the Minister of Education. All higher education institutions are subject to cyclical re-accreditation every five years.

The Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) is an independent public body responsible for external quality assurance in Croatia and implements regular audits, evaluations, accreditation of professional study programs and re-accreditation of all higher education institutions. Also, ASHE carries out systematic educational activities at the national level, especially regarding the education of members of professional bodies involved in the evaluation procedures within the system of external quality assurance and development of science and higher education. One of the roles of the ASHE is to administer and support the activities of the National Council for Higher Education, National Council for Science, Council for Financing Scientific Activity and Higher Education, Council of Polytechnics and Colleges, Ethics Committee in Science and Higher Education, 7 Scientific Field Committees, 22 Area Councils and expert bodies. The Accreditation Council is the professional council of the Agency which adopts documents related to external evaluation procedures and serves as the final opinion on the quality of higher education institutions and scientific organizations. In April 2008, the ASHE became a full member of CEEN (Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education). In the same year, the ASHE joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD IMHE (Institutional management in Higher Education) forum. Becoming a full member of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and being listed in EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education) in 2011, the Agency proved its reliability as a quality assurance agency working in the European Higher Education Area. In October 2011, Croatian Parliament adopted the strategic document the Higher Education Institutions and Study Programs Network in accordance with the provisions of the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education. This document sets out qualitative criteria that should serve as a basis for future assessments of justifiability/feasibility of establishing new higher educations and study programs.

Main governing bodies

The Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MSES) is the administrative body responsible for planning, funding and monitoring the overall education system. The MSES provides administrative and other activities relating to: the higher education system, securing financial and material conditions for work, all issues related to student welfare, and the legal supervision of higher education institutions. The National Council for Higher Education is an expert and advisory body of the Croatian Parliament responsible for the development and quality of higher education in the Republic of Croatia.
The Rectors’ Conference includes all public university rectors and decides on issues of common interest for the development of universities. The Council of Polytechnics and Schools of Professional Higher Education consists of the deans of all polytechnics and schools of professional higher education. The Council decides on issues of common interest for the development of polytechnics and schools of professional higher education. The Agency for Science and Higher Education is an independent national body responsible for assessment of scientific activities and quality assurance in higher education, recognition of diplomas and qualifications through the ENIC/NARIC, and since 2009, for collecting information on Croatian higher education and science, providing support for the implementation of the State Matura – national exams for graduates from secondary schools, and the administration of centralized applications and admissions to higher education. The Agency for Mobility and EU Programs, the National Agency for Lifelong Learning Program and the Youth in Action Program provides support for Erasmus coordinators at higher education institutions. Also, this agency coordinates National Team of Bologna Experts and some other EU initiatives in higher education and science. As of 2012 The Agency for Mobility and EU Programs hosts National Tempus Contact Point.

### Legislation in the field of higher education

Croatian higher education is primarily regulated by the *Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education* (Official Gazette 123/03, 198/03, 105/04, 174/04, 02/07, 46/07, 45/09, 63/11) which provided the framework for the implementation of the Bologna process and modernization of the organizational scheme in science and higher education. The Act treats private and public higher education institutions equally.

The *Act on Academic and Professional Titles and Academic Degrees (Qualifications)* (Official Gazette, 107/07) was passed in September 2007 and established an overarching system of qualifications for students graduating from Bologna study program, as well as provided a framework for comparison of pre-Bologna and Bologna titles. Following the publication of the list of all new academic and professional qualifications by the Rectors' Council, higher education institutions have been setting up rules and procedures for this recognition process.

The *Act on Student Council and Other Student Organizations* (Official Gazette, 71/07) was passed in July 2007, reforming the system of student representation in Croatia. It allowed stronger student oversight of the functioning of their representatives and introduced an obligatory student ombudsman to all higher education institutions.

The 2009 *Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Science* (Official Gazette, 45/09) enabled complete autonomy of the Agency for Science and Higher Education in the external quality assurance processes in Croatia. It also gave autonomy to public universities to freely establish new programs. In February 2010, a new Ordinance was passed on the Content of Accreditation and the Conditions for Issuing of Accreditation for Higher Education, Delivery of Study Programs and Re-accreditation of Higher Education Institutions. The Ordinance also forms the basis for the development of policies for the recognition of prior learning and flexible learning paths.

The *Act on Regulated Professions and the Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications* was passed at the end of 2009 in order to align the requirements for education in regulated professions with Directive 2005/36/EC (Official Gazette, 124/09, 45/11).

to this Act procedures for academic recognition are placed under the jurisdiction of higher education institutions, while professional recognition is under the authority of the Croatian ENIC/NARIC office within ASHE.