THE ACADEMIC INFORMATION CENTRE
(AIC)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses the compliance of the Latvian Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA), a department of the Academic Information Centre (AIC) with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) Part 2 and 3. The report is based on an ENQA coordinated peer review and the underlining review methodology. The site visit of the panel in charge of the review took place in Riga in February 2023 and the overall review was conducted from August 2022 to May 2023.

AIKA received membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in 2018 and was registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in the same year. With this review the agency seeks to renew its ENQA membership and registration in EQAR.

In summary, the review panel recognises the efforts by the agency to comply with the European Standards and Guidelines. Based on a thorough assessment of the agency's activities against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, the panel concludes the following: The agency overall complies with the European Standards and Guidelines. It complies with the following standards: ESG 2.2, 2.3, 2.5, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7. The agency only complies partially with the following standards: ESG 2.1, 2.4, 2.6 and 2.7.

Most of the agency's activities relate to Latvian higher education. AIKA undertakes those activities in a highly-regulated context, where trust between the Ministry and higher education institutions seems to be growing. For the time being external quality assurance is performed mainly at programme and study field level, based on detailed legislative frameworks. In the past years AIKA has obtained more freedom to develop its own procedures. It has managed to complement the extensive compulsory checks on compliance with an enhancement-oriented focus during review processes. All stakeholders the review panel met valued the contribution of AIKA to external quality assurance in the Latvian higher education system. They also recognized the competence of both the highly motivated agency staff and its external reviewers.

All new programmes have to participate in the ex-ante licensing procedure organised by the agency. Overall, this procedure is aligned with the ESG. When no study field accreditation follows within two years of the launch of a licensed programme, that programme is assessed externally to check elements of quality which were difficult to assess ex-ante ("Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field"). EQAR assessed this procedure based on the substantive change report submitted by the agency and flagged the issue that this process is carried out by two experts, but does not include a student-member. This shortcoming has not been remedied, yet, and, therefore, the review panel renders this process not to be compliant with ESG 2.4.

Once study programmes are in operation, they are assessed externally per study field. This review procedure is the agency's main procedure. Under this procedure an institution's programmes in each field of study are assessed, partly at study field level and partly at study programme level. Overall, the panel considers that this process is in line with the ESG.

The legislative framework allows higher education institutions to have another EQAR-registered agency perform study field reviews, as a basis for accreditation by AIKA. Until now, the agency hasn't fully prepared such procedure. The review panel considers that the agency should provide clear guidelines in English on how it will manage such a procedure. These guidelines including all necessary information need to be in place soon, and certainly before an institution decides to appoint another EQAR-registered agency to perform a review, taking into consideration the fact that other EQAR-registered agencies are from abroad.

Study programmes also need to get approval from the agency to implement fundamental changes (such as changes in language of education, number of ECTS and entry provisions) between two cycles of external evaluation ("Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields"). The agency considers this as a technical procedure covering ESG Part 2 only in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation and assessment of study field. Assessment is delegated to one expert, without involving a student-member. The agency, however, does not provide the expert with sufficient guidance on which elements should be considered in this review. This procedure is included in the Terms of Reference of this review and leads to a formal decision that confirms, or otherwise, the quality of the adapted or extended programme. Therefore, the panel considers that the agency should also guarantee ESG-compliance of this procedure. That the same programmes had been subject to ESG-compliant procedures previously and were to be later on, does not relieve this procedure from this requirement. ESG-compliance may be achieved by the development of an ESG-compliant assessment framework, as well as composition of panels in line with the ESG.

The Study Quality Commission is in charge of issuing accreditation decisions based on AIKA quality assurance procedures. The Study Quality Commission invests considerable time to ensure consistent decision making. Its decisions are not solely based on the published experts' reports, but also on additional information provided by an institution, as well as a hearing of the institution. A decision thus takes into account work that may have been done since the site visit or even after the issuing of the experts' reports. A decision may also address remaining issues by including 'tasks' that the institution must perform before a specified date to sustain the initial decision. The ENQA panel sees the value of this approach from enhancement and developmental perspectives. However, in order to transparently inform the public and to comply with the ESG, the panel considers that any additional elements to experts reports that had been taken into account and the full decision including potential tasks for the institution, should both be published together with experts' reports.

Furthermore, the agency performs reviews of newly-established higher education institutions, that form the basis for the decision on their accreditation by the Council for Higher Education. As the number of higher education institutions is decreasing rather than increasing, this procedure has only been implemented once in recent years. The framework used is in line with the ESG.

In addition to reviews in Latvia, the agency has also developed a framework for the assessment of higher education programmes in other countries. This procedure was developed mainly to respond to requests from Ukrainian higher education institutions. Due to their workload in Latvia and the geopolitical context, the agency had discontinued this procedure temporarily when the review panel visited. The agency had not decided whether it would relaunch this process at the time of the ENQA-review. Although the absence of an appeals procedure and committee means this procedure is not fully compliant with the ESG, the other features of this type of assessment generally do meet the ESG requirements.

Finally, many stakeholders hope to evolve quality assurance from this current highly-interventionist approach to a cyclical institutional accreditation framework by 2026. The panel understood the relevant Ministry is willing to grant institutions more autonomy if they are able to provide convincing evidence that they are capable of managing effective internal quality assurance systems. The review panel encourages the agency to further develop a clear vision for a future external quality assurance system that balances autonomy and accountability to the demonstrable benefit of learners. The workload for institutions needs to be sustainable irrespective of their size, perhaps for smaller institutions by interinstitutional pooling of resources and cooperation. The agency should develop a strategy on how to best evolve from the current highly-regulated system to a system comprising institutions with more autonomy. It should discuss with both the Ministry and the institutions the sequence of changes to legislation, policies, procedures and resources that need to be taken to (i)

prepare institutions to take on this greater responsibility and (ii) maintain and enhance trust in the quality of higher education with the Ministry and key stakeholders as well as broader society.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Latvian Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA), a department of the Academic Information Centre (Akadēmiskās informācijas centra, AIC) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). It is based on an external review conducted in August 2022 till May 2023.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

As this is AIC's second review, the panel is expected to provide clear evidence of results in all areas and to acknowledge progress from the previous review. The panel adopted a developmental approach, as the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews aim at constant enhancement of the agencies.

AIC has undergone a first ENQA review in 2018. Consequently, it received membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in 2018 and was listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in the same year.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

In March 2015 the Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA) was established as an autonomous department of AIC, with the mandate to ensure quality assurance functions. Other structural units of AIC do not perform external quality assurance; as their activities do not fall within the scope of the ESG, they are not subject to this review.

The following activities of the agency are addressed in the external review:
- Accreditation of higher education institution
- Assessment and accreditation of a study field
- Licensing of study programme
- Accreditation of study programmes abroad
- Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)
- Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field

Ther Terms of Reference of this review mention in a footnote "*These last two activities are not designed as stand-alone procedures, and, therefore, do not independently cover all requirements of the ESG Part 2. They are only designed to cover the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation of a study field.*" However, the review panel considers that this approach does not relieve the agency fully from compliance with the ESG wherever relevant in those procedures. The review panel has assessed the individual procedure's compliance with the ESG, as requested by the Terms of Reference for the review. ("*To apply for ENQA membership and EQAR registration, this review will analyse all of the agency's activities that fall within the scope of the ESG […]*"). Furthermore, the review panel has taken into account the specific request "*Considering the renewal of AIC's application to EQAR, the self-evaluation report and the external review report are expected to give specific attention to the issues where the Register Committee concluded in its last decisions that the agency complied only partially with the ESG, namely ESG 2.4 and ESG 2.7.*"

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2018 REVIEW

The 2018 panel found the agency's performance against the ESG in accordance with the following:
- Fully compliant with the following ESGs: 3.2, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 2.3, and 2.4
- Substantially compliant with the following ESGs: 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, and 2.6
- Partially compliant with the following ESGs: 2.7

In 2021 the agency submitted a Substantive Change Report to EQAR, including the launch of two new procedures Accreditation of foreign study programmes and 'Inclusion of licenced study programmes on the accreditation of a study field, as well as the change of the activity Accreditation of study directions into wo separate activities Assessment of study fields and Accreditation of study fields[1]. EQAR noted shortcomings in ESG compliance, so therefore, asked AIC to make a further report by 15 January 2022 detailing its course of actions to ensure compliance with ESG 2.3, 2.4 and ESG 2.7 in its new activities. Based on this second report[2], the Register Committee considered that for the Accreditation of foreign study programmes "*the conditions and modalities for institutions to appeal should be entirely clear and communicated beforehand. The uncertainty about the appeals committee does not give confidence that an appeals system is fully in place and ready.*", which led to the conclusion that the agency remained partially compliant with ESG 2.7. Furthermore, the Register Committee considered the compliance with ESG 2.4 for the Inclusion of study programmes on the accreditation of a study field, It "*acknowledged that the procedure was created as a temporary and short-term solution, in order to close possible gaps in the accreditation periods of programmes until the next re-accreditation of the corresponding study field*". The committee considered that "*The requirement of standard 2.4 is clear that at least one expert should be a student if a procedure is based on peer review by experts.*" and "*The specific nature of this quality assurance procedure could have been a valid argument to design it as an entirely desk-based, administrative procedure without involving any experts at all. AIC, however, did decide to involve experts in the procedure.*" The Register Committee concluded that the "*experts should include a student and that the compliance issue with regard to ESG 2.4 remains.*" As a result and different from the initial conclusion reached in the decision of 06/12/2018 to include AIC on the Register, the Register Committee considered that due to this shortcoming AIC only partially complies with standard 2.4.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2023 external review of AIC was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the external review of AIC was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:
- Brian Norton, Professor, Past-President, Dublin Institute of Technology (now, Technological University Dublin), Ireland, Chair, academic (EUA nominee);
- Pieter-Jan Van de Velde, Freelance higher education consultant, former staff member of VLUHR QA, Belgium, Secretary, quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee);
- Ieva Vaiciukevičienė, Head of Legal and General Affairs Division, Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), Lithuania, Panel member, quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee);
- Michał Goszczyński, Master student in Administration, Warsaw University of Technology, Poland, Panel member, student (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool).

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[1] https://backend.deqar.eu/reports/EQAR/2021_10_AIC_C63_Decision_SubstantiveChangeReport.pdf
[2] https://backend.deqar.eu/reports/EQAR/C76_AIC_SubstantiveChangeReport_Decision_v1_0.pdf

Milja Homan (ENQA Project and Reviews Officer), acted as the review coordinator.

Self-assessment report

The self-assessment report (SAR) was a collaborative work of the staff of the agency. During the process of the self-evaluation, there were discussions with stakeholders, including the Study Quality Commission (SQC) and Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (Council), which comprises representative authorities of different organisations such as Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), Student Union of Latvia (LSA), Council of Rectors, employers' organisations etc.

Internal discussions with all employees of the agency were held on a regular basis and everyone contributed to the self-assessment report. Each employee was involved in the development of SAR by providing information or writing some sections in accordance with their duties. As the agency had several new staff members this process provided them an opportunity to get to know agency's work and tasks in a more detailed and comprehensive way.

The report has been prepared by a self-assessment report working group that was coordinated by Jolanta Silka (Head of the Agency) and includes Ilva Grigorjeva (Head of the Quality Assessment Unit) and Laila Lemko (expert – assessment coordinator). The final version of the report was approved by the chairperson of the AIC Board – Baiba Ramiņa.

The self-assessment report was found to be informative and it served as a useful source of information to the panel.

Site visit

Based on the site visit template, as suggested by ENQA, the site visit was designed in close collaboration between the agency and the panel. The programme included interview sessions with the Chair of the AIC Board, members of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council and social partners, the Study Quality Commission, the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes and the Appeals Commission, the management and staff of the agency, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, representatives of Latvian higher education institutions, student representatives and members of expert teams. The panel visited the premises of the agency and received a presentation of the agency's E-platform. A meeting with Ukrainian higher education institutions could not be arranged, so the panel was not able to meet the institutions which participated in the accreditation process of study programmes abroad. The panel did meet two reviewers who had participated in such processes, and was able to study the methodology and review experts' reports. It therefore, considers itself to be sufficiently informed about all the procedures that the agency performs.

The schedule of the meetings is available in Annex 1. A limited number of stakeholders participated online. Thanks to the support from ENQA and the agency staff and the technical excellence of the equipment, the panel was able to focus on the substance of the review without any difficulties.

Due to health issues, the secretary participated in one of the meetings (meeting 5, see annex) via Zoom and the student-member participated in a limited number of meetings (meetings 5, 16-18, see annex) via Zoom. The student-member could not participate in two of the meetings (meetings 14-15) due to health reasons. They participated in person in most of the process. The ENQA-review coordinator participated fully remotely, but this did not influence the process negatively.

At the end of the site visit, the panel held an internal meeting where it agreed on the preliminary conclusions relating to the level of compliance of the agency on each of the standards of Part 2 and 3 of the ESG. The Chair of the panel delivered a summary of the panel's overall findings to the leadership of the agency. The secretary of the panel then drafted the report, this report was discussed with the panel members, which led to the final draft agreed upon by the panel members. This draft report was submitted to the agency for a check on factual inaccuracies in April 2023.
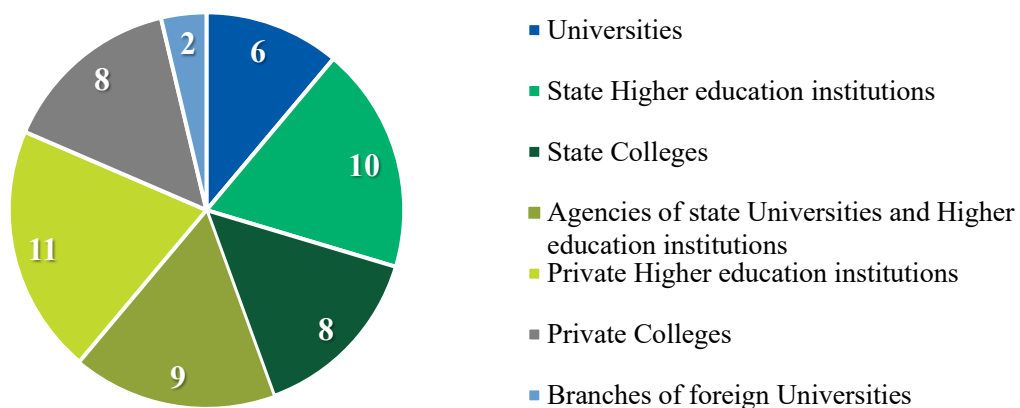
HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The higher education system of Latvia consists of college education (short cycle), academic bachelor's studies or professional bachelor's studies (first cycle), academic master's studies or professional master's studies (second cycle) and doctoral studies.

The higher education in Latvia is offered by private and state higher education institutions. There are two types of higher education institutions – colleges (koledžas) and institutions of higher education (augstskolas). The institutions of higher education include higher education institutions (augstskolas), academies (akadēmijas) and universities (universitātes). The colleges can only offer first level professional higher education programmes (short cycle corresponding to the EQF level 5), whereas the other higher education institutions could offer higher education at any level. However, in 2021 the amendments to the Law in Higher Education Institutions were approved, which set strategic specialisation of higher education institutions and types such as university of science, university of art and culture, university of applied science, higher education institution (augstskola) of applied science (the new typology of higher education institutions had not yet been introduced at the time of the review).

Figure 1: Distribution of types of higher education institutions in Latvia, as provided in SAR, p.8

- Universities
- State Higher education institutions
- State Colleges
- Agencies of state Universities and Higher education institutions
- Private Higher education institutions
- Private Colleges
- Branches of foreign Universities

Source: self-assessment report

Figure 1 gives an overview of the types of higher education institutions operating in Latvia. State higher education institutions and private institutions had 59.612 and 17.764 students respectively in 2021.

Higher education in Latvia is financed both by public and private funding. The state funding is granted directly to the higher education institution. The funding of higher education varies within the system, but mainly state institutions receive state funded study places, whereas private institutions can receive state funded study places in specific case only, so they are primarily financed through student tuition fees.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

External quality assurance in higher education in Latvia has developed since the restoration of independence in the early 1990s. The first quality assurance agency of Latvia - Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (HEQEC) was established in 1994 in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Rectors' Council, four Latvian universities and a private higher education institution. HEQEC performed accreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions between 1996 and 2012.

In 2010, the HEQEC underwent an external conformity assessment to evaluate whether it was in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), but the outcome was negative. The assessment concluded that HEQEC did not fully comply with all requirements. This negative assessment was one of the reasons for the changes in the external quality assessment system.

Between 2010 and 2012 the Council of Higher Education (CHE) carried out a project of study programmes evaluation within the framework of the European Social Fund (ESF). A detailed evaluation of study programmes at higher education institutions and colleges in Latvia was performed over two years. Although the ESF project did not envisage the evaluation of the quality of study fields for the purpose of accreditation, it was decided to use the results of the ESF project for the accreditation of study fields, therefore the transition from accreditation of study programmes to the accreditation of study fields was confirmed.

In 2012 the function of quality assessment was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Science which directly carried out quality assessment of higher education in Latvia till July 2015. In this period, the Ministry organised both the accreditation of study fields and the higher education institutions as well as licensing of study programmes. Accreditation decisions on higher education institutions were taken by the CHE, whereas the decisions on accreditation of study fields and on licensing of study programmes were taken by the Committee for the Accreditation of Studies and the Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes, respectively, which was approved by the Minister for Education and Science.

Being aware of the need to establish a national quality assurance body that would operate in accordance with the ESG to promote the quality of higher education, its visibility, and international recognition, the Ministry of Education and Science, in collaboration with stakeholders, developed the Concept of the Development of Latvian Higher Education Quality Improvement. This concept put forward the proposal to delegate the quality assurance functions to the Academic Information Centre (AIC).

ACADEMIC INFORMATION CENTRE

The Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA) was established in March 2015 as the structural unit - Accreditation department - within the Academic Information Centre (AIC).

AIC is a public non-profit foundation which has been established in 1994 with the aim to perform functions and tasks related to recognition and transparency tools.

The main objectives of AIC stated in its Statutes are as follows:
1. to ensure the participation of Republic of Latvia in the education information networks of European Council, European Union and UNESCO as well as to carry out tasks stated in the legal acts of the Republic of Latvia in order to ensure free movement of individuals in the education and employment sector;

2. to support the quality assurance of higher education by organising the accreditation of higher education institutions (university type and non-university type institutions), study fields and licensing of study programmes.

AIKA is currently the only independent and recognised higher education quality assurance institution in Latvia. The agency was established with the aim of improving the external quality assurance system of higher education in Latvia and promoting the quality, visibility and international recognition of higher education of Latvia. Since the establishment of the agency in 2015, it carries out the following responsibilities and functions:
* Ensuring the assessment and accreditation in higher education;
* Ensuring the quality monitoring and improvement of study fields;
* Performing the analysis at the system level, carry out research, participate in the projects related to external quality assurance matters;
* Informing society about assessment results;
* Providing the necessary information and support for higher education institutions and other stakeholders;
* Developing procedures and guidelines for ensuring the functions of the agency;
* Participating in international networks for external quality assurance.

The agency's vision reads as follows "The quality assurance agency for higher education is trustful and internationally recognized, it contributes to the continuous quality enhancement of higher education in Latvia and takes active role in quality assurance processes of the European and global higher education area."

Its mission is stated as follows:
* promotes the improvement of quality of higher education of Latvia and contributes to the development of quality culture and its maintenance in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area;
* carries out the expertise and provides reliable information on higher education quality assessment and development/improvement issues;
* it is a credible partner of higher education institutions, policy makers, existing and potential students and other stakeholders in Latvia and abroad;
* its high reputation is provided by the professionalism of employees and experts, accumulated experience in the change management processes of higher education in Europe, including in Eastern and Central Europe.

AIC'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

The agency is a structural unit of AIC, as indicated above. As a quality assurance agency, it operates under the name Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA).

The agency is supervised by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (Council), which comprises eight members representing different stakeholder organisations. The Council approves the composition of the Study Quality Commission (SQC) and the Appeals Commission. In addition, the Council is involved in strategic issues of the agency by setting strategic directions for development.

The Study Quality Commission takes decisions on the licensing of study programmes, accreditation of study fields, approval of changes in study fields and relevant study programmes and inclusion of licensed study programmes in the accreditation form of study fields. It consists of seven members, who have experience in higher education quality assessment, organisation of the study process in higher education, the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process) and other international processes

in higher education and the organisation and facilitation of cooperation between the higher education and labour market, scientific research and artistic creation.

The four-member Appeals Commission reviews the applications for contesting the decisions of the SQC and makes a final decision.

The Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes takes decisions on the accreditation of study programmes of foreign higher education institutions abroad. It consists of at least five members, one of whom shall be a representative of employers, one of whom shall be a representative of students, and at least three of whom shall be representatives of different groups of scientific disciplines.

Figure 2: Organisational structure of the agency, as provided in the SAR, p.14
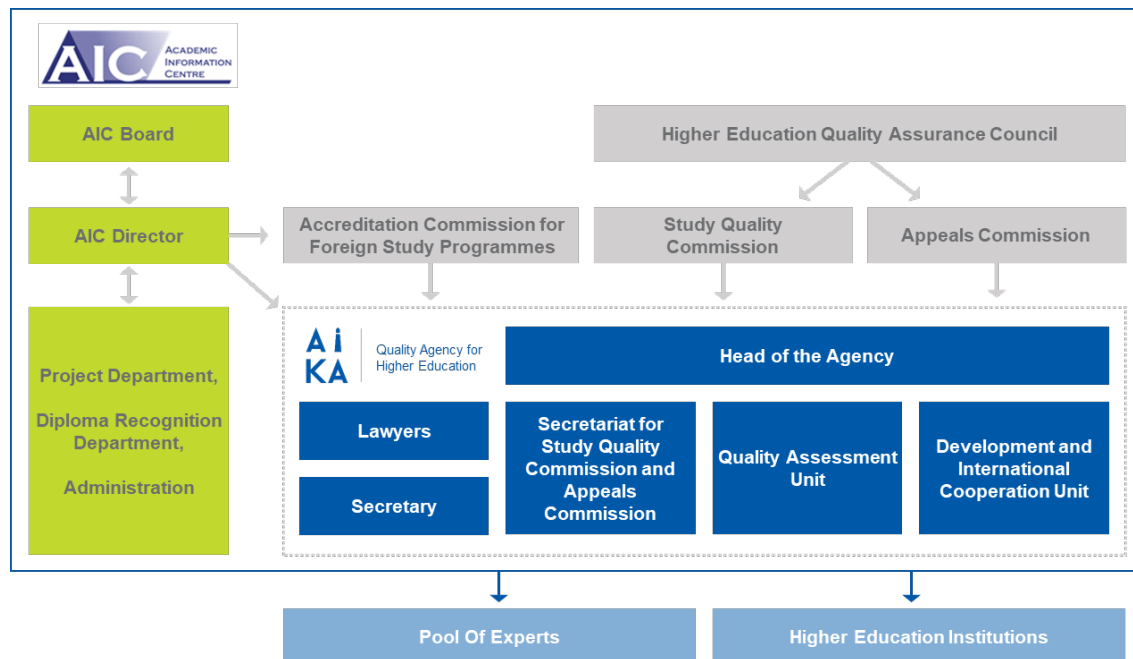
Source: self-assessment report

As demonstrated in the chart above, the agency is managed by the Head of the Agency. The management of the agency consists of the Head of Agency, Head of Quality Assessment Unit and Head of Development and International Cooperation Unit. At the moment of the review there are 18 staff members in the agency.

AIC's FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

Table 1 provides an overview of all procedures conducted by the agency.

Table 1: Overview of the QA procedures in Latvia (based on information provided in the SAR)

Type of Assessment	Organisation	Experts	Decision-making body	Frequency
Licensing of study programme	Agency	**3 experts** (academic, student, labour market)	Study Quality Commission	Mandatory ex-ante procedure, including site-visit

Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field	Agency	**2 experts** (field experts – 1 local and 1 foreign)	Study Quality Commission	Technical non-cyclical procedure within 2 years after the start of a licenced new programme, if not assessed under a study field review in the same period.
Accreditation and assessment of study field	Agency and or other EQAR agency	**At least 5 experts** (academic, student, labour market, in all cases at least 2 foreign experts)	Study Quality Commission	Mandatory cyclical procedure, including site visit Validity: - 6 years (positive decision) - 2 years (conditional decision) - 0 years (negative decision)
Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)	Agency	**No or 1 expert** (field expert)	Study Quality Commission	Technical non-cyclical procedure in case of substantial changes in study programmes
Institutional accreditation	Agency	**7 experts** (academic, student, labour market, in all cases at least 2 foreign experts)	Council of Higher Education Due to the legislative changes from 2025 Study Quality Commission	At the moment of establishment of a new higher education institution. All higher education institutions in Latvia are accredited for indefinite period.
Accreditation of foreign study programmes	Agency	**At least 4 experts** (academic, student, labour market)	Accreditation Commission for foreign study programmes	Procedure for foreign higher education institutions operating abroad

Table 2: Overview of procedures completed in Latvia from 2018 to 2022 (based on information in the SAR, p.19 and p.72)

	2018	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022 (till 31 October)*
Licensing of study programme	22	12	60	37	13
Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)	18	25	37	19	14
Inclusion of a licensed programme	0	0	0	0	30
Accreditation and assessment of study fields	0	4	2	54	30
Institutional accreditation	0	0	1	0	0
Accreditation of foreign study programmes	-	-	8	7	-

Institutional accreditation

The accreditation of a higher education institution is an assessment of the work organisation and quality of resources of a higher education institution. As a result of this accreditation the higher education institution is recognised by the state to be entitled to issue state recognised diplomas. All Latvian higher education institutions are accredited for an indefinite term and the extraordinary accreditation of a higher education institution can be initiated only in case of violations of regulatory acts.

A transition to institutional accreditation as the main cyclical external quality assurance procedure in Latvia is being prepared. In 2022 amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions were approved which indicate that starting from 2025 the decision-making body for Institutional accreditation will be SQC (instead of the Council of Higher Education), and at that moment the new form of institutional accreditation will be implemented.

Licensing of a Study Programme

Licensing of a study programme is the initial assessment (ex-ante) to review the potential quality of a new study programme in order to have rights to enrol students and to start the implementation of the study programme. Each new study programme has to be licensed and only after that students could be enrolled. Decision on the licensing of study programmes is taken by the SQC.

During the licensing procedure it is reviewed whether:
1. a study programme is compliant with requirements of regulatory acts;
2. qualification of the academic staff;
3. material and technical base;
4. content and implementation mechanism;
5. a study programme is included in the relevant study field.

Assessment and accreditation of study fields

The main procedure in the Latvian higher education system is the assessment and accreditation of study fields. The first phase in this is the process is the assessment with the purpose of determining the quality of the resources of the higher education institution and the ability to implement a study programme corresponding to a specific study field in accordance with regulatory enactments. In addition, its purpose is to identify areas for further improvements and assist the higher education institution in developing a quality culture.

During the assessment of the study field, several pre-defined assessment areas and criteria are evaluated such as:
1. the relevance, aims and objectives of the study field and its respective study programmes as a whole and their clarity, attainability, and compliance with the general strategic development of the higher education institution;
2. the management of the study field;
3. the efficiency of the internal quality assurance system;
4. resources and provision of the study field;
5. science, research and artistic creation;
6. cooperation and internationalisation;
7. the implementation of the recommendations (if any) provided for a particular study programme within the framework of the previous accreditation of the study field (if conducted) or licensing of a study programme.

As the study field consists of several study programmes, there are some additional aspects which are reviewed separately for each study programme:

1. the reciprocal compliance between the name of the study programme, the degree to be acquired, professional qualification or degree and professional qualification, aims and objectives, and terms of admission;
2. the curricula;
3. compliance of the qualification of the academic staff with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the requirements set out in the regulatory enactments;
4. resources and provisions specific to the study programme;
5. employment perspectives of the graduates of the study programme.

Based on the assessment, the Study Quality Commission may grant accreditation of the study field. This accreditation gives the right to issue a state-recognised diplomas of higher education for successful acquisition of a study programme corresponding to the relevant study field.

Study fields may be accredited for three terms – 6 years (positive decision), 2 years (conditional decision, if substantial deficiency is detected but may be eliminated within the scope of the time period of accreditation of the study field) or 0 years (negative decision).

Latvian higher education institutions may appoint any other EQAR-registered agency to perform the assessment of their study fields. However, only AIKA is allowed to grant accreditation. At the time of the review, no guidelines or procedures had been developed for in case a higher education institution involves another EQAR-registered agency.

Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields

Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes) is a non-cyclical activity that is done based on the request of higher education institutions if changes are made to their study programmes between cyclical assessments of study fields. In most cases changes in study fields are under the autonomy of the higher education institution and are approved without involving experts. The Cabinet regulations prescribe cases when changes are reviewed by one expert. In other cases, the changes are approved without experts' review. Experts are involved in case of:
- changes in the name, code, place of implementation, type, form of implementation of the study programme, language of implementation, changes in the professional qualification or the degree to be acquired;
- changes in the relation of a study programme to the study field;
- changes in the admission requirements of the study programme;
- changes introduced in a study programme during the accreditation period of the relevant study field to the duration or the amount of the study programme exceeds 20% of the amount of study programmes credit points defined in the application for accreditation;
- changes in the academic staff working in the higher education institutions study field or a study programme of the relevant study field since the last accreditation of the study field are at least 20% of the total number of academic staff members working in the relevant study field, or if at least 50% of the total amount of academic work at the higher education institution in the relevant study field (excluding the elective part of study programme, the implementation of traineeships and final examinations) is no longer provided by the academic staff members of the respective higher education institution.

In its application to EQAR (Application by AIC - Academic Information Centre (AIC) for Inclusion on the Register, Minutes of Telephone Conversation, 05/09/2017)), the activity "assessment of feasibility on changes in programmes" was considered by AIC to be outside the scope of the ESG. The agency explained that the activity was not a cyclical activity, and that it mostly dealt with changes in the name of the programme, the content of a programme or in the number of teaching staff and thus AIC considered the activity to be outside the scope of the ESG. EQAR, however, confirmed that it

considered the process to be within the scope of the ESG (Confirmation of Eligibility: Application for Inclusion/Renewal of Inclusion on the Register, Application no. A60 of 31/08/2017).

The previous ENQA review panel considered "As this is not a typical accreditation process and more of a 'follow up consequence' of other accreditation processes, is it not considered by the panel to require reference under findings on ESG compliance in this report (ENQA Review 2018, p.15). Nevertheless, EQAR confirmed ESG compliance of the "assessment of feasibility on changes in programmes" procedure in its decision (Approval of the Application by Academic Information Centre (AIC) for Inclusion on the Register, 06/12/2018).

In the Terms of Reference "Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)" is included as a separate activity, while the following was added in a footnote "This activity was not designed as a stand-alone procedure and therefore does not independently cover all requirements of the ESG Part 2. It only covers the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation of study field."

Because of the explicit inclusion of this procedure in the Terms of Reference, the review panel pays particular attention to this procedure in this report.

Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field

Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field is a non-cyclical activity which is applicable to study programmes that are licensed after the accreditation of the relevant study field within two years after starting its implementation. The procedure was included in the legal framework in 2019 by the Cabinet as a short-term solution due to the fact that the accreditation term of all study fields was extensively prolonged so there was a concern that newly licensed study programmes could prepare graduates without the study process being externally evaluated. This methodology was designed in 2021. The purpose of this type of assessment is to address those assessment criteria which could not be effectively covered during the licensing procedure and would normally be covered during the accreditation of study fields. In many cases higher education institutions skip this procedure and the programme is assessed within the accreditation of the relevant study field.

Accreditation of foreign study programmes

Accreditation of foreign study programmes is an assessment procedure which was introduced in 2020. It is applicable for higher education institutions from countries where the legal framework foresees accreditation of study programmes. Within this procedure separate study programmes are assessed and accredited. The agency does not accept new assessment applications from abroad anymore.

International activities

One of the strategic objectives of the agency is to develop international cooperation and competitiveness of the agency through the participation in the processes of the higher education quality assessment policy making, the promotion of quality assessment and enhancement.

The agency is involved and actively participates in the activities of international organisations through membership in such international networks:
- ENQA – The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – as affiliate in 2015 and as a member since 2018. The head of the agency has been elected as a Board member in 2021. A senior expert of the agency was involved in the working group on micro-credentials.
- Listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), since December 2018.

- CEENQA – Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education – since 2016. The head of the agency served as a Board member in 2018–2022.
- INQAAHE – the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, since 2015.
- ECA – the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education, since 2017.
- CHEA International Quality Group, since 2018.

The agency has been involved in different international projects as a partner. The agency has also collaboration with other departments of AIC and provides support to the implementation of other international projects.

A networking meeting and seminar of the quality assurance agencies from the Baltic States is held annually where staff share experience and discuss the challenges and tendencies in external quality assurance. The agency has also established cooperations with other European quality assurance agencies that are opportunities for the exchange of experience and learning good practices.

AIC's funding

The agency's revenue consists of fees paid for assessment procedures:
- Assessment and accreditation of study fields, assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields and inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field.
- Licensing of study programmes and Institutional accreditation.

The revenue from paid services varies and does not cover the full costs of the implementation of the functions of the agency. Therefore, the agency receives an allocation from the state budget each year. The state budget allocation ensures sustainability and the independence of the activities of the agency.

In the period 2016-2019 the ESF project "The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency" was implemented and, so, additional funds were available.

Table 3. Funding of the agency (euro), as provided in the SAR, p.36

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 (Jan-Oct)
Total funding of the Agency	**587.761,29**	**778.873,53**	**1.202.534,08**	**1.128.549,55**	**916.113,00**
State budget	299.216,00	293.317,00	359.911,00	424.918,00	353.275,00
ESF project	189.056,29	244.605,53	42.463,08	0,00	0,00
Fees from HEI	99.489,00	240.951,00	800.160,00	703.631,55	562.838,00

Source: self-assessment report

The agency's main expenditures include staff remuneration, remuneration for review experts, remuneration for members of SQC and Appeals Commission, as well as expenses for technical maintenance of the E-platform and the agency's website, participation fees in international organisations, business trips, costs related to the organisation of seminars and trainings, including hire of venues and the costs of invited speakers. The expenditures of the agency also include the costs of office rent and maintenance, office items and communications, accounting services and exceptional expenses.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF AIC WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG)

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.

2018 review recommendation

The panel recommends that AIKA continue to ensure that all quality evaluation processes (accreditation of study programmes, Licensing and institutional accreditation) evolve further to become fully compliant with the ESG. The high-level cabinet regulations still prescribe a quality control approach, which AIKA should continue to influence positively with the support of higher education institutions.

Evidence

The function as a quality assurance agency is emphasised in the Statutes of AIC that state the following task: "to support the quality assurance of higher education by organising the evaluation of higher education institutions, study fields and study programmes, including their accreditation and licensing."

The quality assurance function is separated from other functions of AIC in a specific department "Quality Agency for Higher Education - AIKA" (the agency) confirmed in the by-laws of AIC.

According to the self-assessment report, quality assurance is emphasized in the mission statement of the agency:
* it promotes the improvement of quality of higher education of Latvia and contributes to the development of quality culture and its maintenance in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA;
* it carries out expertise and provides reliable information on higher education quality assessment and development/improvement issues;
* it is a credible partner for higher education institutions, policy makers, existing and potential students and other stakeholders in Latvia and abroad;
* its high reputation is provided by the professionalism of the staff of the agency and assessment experts, accumulated experience in the change management processes of higher education in Europe, including Eastern and Central Europe.

For the period 2017-2022, the agency's key objectives were as follows[3]:

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[3] https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/about-aika/

1. to ensure that the external quality assurance system of higher education of Latvia is in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG);
2. to carry out the external quality assessment of higher education in Latvia and to promote the improvement of the internal quality assurance system of higher education institutions, study fields and study programmes;
3. to ensure the financial sustainability of the agency for the implementation of its mission in appropriate quality and in accordance with the accepted values;
4. to act as the higher education quality assurance competence centre in Latvia and to promote international visibility and recognition of higher education of Latvia;
5. to develop international cooperation and competitiveness of the agency through the participation in the processes of the higher education quality assessment policy making, the promotion of quality assessment and enhancement.

In order to achieve those goals, annual action plans were prepared.

At the moment of the review, the agency was preparing a new strategic plan for the period 2023-2027. In 2022 a survey was disseminated among different stakeholders in order to review the agency's work.

At the time of the review the agency mainly performed the following quality assurance activities on a regular basis:
1. Licensing of study programme
2. Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field
3. Assessment and accreditation of a study field
4. Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields

For the time being, the agency continues to implement these procedures on a regular basis.

Furthermore, the agency is in charge of the (ex-ante) Accreditation of newly established higher education institutions. In the past 5 years, only one new institution underwent this kind of review. As indicated above, a transition to institutional accreditation as the main cyclical external quality assurance procedure in Latvia is being prepared. In 2022 amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions were approved which indicate that starting from 2025 on the decision-making body for Institutional accreditation will be SQC (instead of the Council of Higher Education), and at that moment the new form of institutional accreditation may be implemented. Although many stakeholders are in favour of this transition, little information was available at the time of the ENQA review on how the future framework for cyclical institutional accreditation would look like, and how institutional accreditation will relate to the other existing external and internal quality assurance processes.

At the time of the ENQA review, the agency did not accept new applications for the Accreditation of foreign study programmes due to the high workload among the team. During the site visit, stakeholders expressed different visions on whether new applications should be accepted or not in the future.

Stakeholders are involved in all governance and decision-making structures of the agency and also take part in daily work. The Council comprises 8 members representing different stakeholder organisations:
- Representative of the Latvian Employers' Confederation (acting as chairperson),
- The AIC chairperson,
- Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science,
- Representative of the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (represented by the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees)
- Representative of the Association of Colleges of Latvia,

- Representative of the Rectors' Council,
- Representative of the Students Union of Latvia,
- The President of the Council of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Both the decision-making bodies involved in individual quality assurance decisions, the Study Quality Commission and the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes, include student and employers representatives.

Analysis

The agency clearly implements a broad range of external quality assurance activities on a regular basis. Compliance of the individual procedures is discussed under Part 2. All Latvian procedures are based in Cabinet Regulations issued by the Latvian Government. The focus on external quality assurance activities is also rooted clearly in the organisations' documentation and mission statement.

The review panel learned that AIKA undertakes its activities in a highly-regulated context, where trust between the Ministry and higher education institutions seems to be growing. For the time being external quality assurance is performed mainly at programme and study field level, based on detailed legislative frameworks. In line with the recommendation of the previous external review, the agency advocated for more freedom to develop is own procedures. The panel learned that it indeed was granted with some more autonomy in this respect. The agency has also managed to complement the extensive compulsory checks on compliance of a broad range of legal requirements with an enhancement-oriented focus during review processes.

The panel found that all stakeholders look forward to the implementation of the announced change to Institutional accreditation currently envisaged from 2026. The panel understood the relevant Ministry is willing to grant institutions more autonomy if they are able to provide convincing evidence that they are capable of managing effective internal quality assurance systems. The review panel encourages the agency to develop a clear vision for a future external quality assurance system that balances autonomy and accountability to the demonstrable benefit of learners. The workload for institutions needs to be sustainable irrespective of their size, perhaps for smaller institutions by interinstitutional pooling of resources and cooperation. The agency should develop a strategy on how to best evolve from the current highly-regulated system to a system comprising institutions with more autonomy. It should discuss with both the Ministry and the institutions the sequence of changes to legislation, policies, procedures and resources that need to be taken to (i) prepare institutions to take on this greater responsibility and (ii) maintain and enhance trust in the quality of higher education with the Ministry and key stakeholders as well as broader society.

For the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields the agency has not developed a specific assessment framework. As discussed more in detail under ESG 2.1 and ESG 2.4, the panel recognises that this activity was not designed as a stand-alone procedure and therefore does not independently cover all requirements of the ESG Part 2 and that it only has the ambition to cover the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation of study field, as explained in a footnote in the Terms of Reference of this review. The panel considers, however, that this does not mean that the agency is fully relieved from considering for each aspect of this procedure which ESG standards it may rely on related procedures and for which elements it should comply with elements of the ESG. The panel indicates below under Part 2 of the ESG for which standards it considers the current approach to be sufficient and for which ones it doesn't.

The plan 2017-2022 included clear actions for this period and overall, according to the agency, these actions have been implemented. Based on the information that was collected, the panel may confirm this in general terms. A systematic analysis or follow-up report has not been provided to the panel, however. The fact that the structure of the multi-annual plan has not been followed completely in the

most recent annual action plan, did not contribute to an easy follow-up. The panel sees clear potential to gain efficiency if the agency manages to integrate the reporting on its strategic planning, which is currently reported in the public annual report and the annual report to the Ministry of Education and Science. The latter report contains relevant analysis of the outcomes of review procedures, as well as stakeholder feedback, which is to date only partially recycled in the public annual report. Furthermore, the agency should make sure that the annual report is published on its website as soon as it is available. At the start of the site visit the most recent public report was the one on the year 2020. The agency indicated that this was a result of a technical issue and this was resolved during the site visit.

Overall, the previous multi-annual plan was relatively action oriented. The review panel encourages the agency to make the strategic vision underpinning the future strategic plan more explicit. This may help to increase the impact focus, both in the planning phase and in the evaluation phase.

The panel recognises that the dependence on Government decisions on national quality assurance procedures reduces the influence the agency may have on remit of its own future activities. Nevertheless, the review panel encourages the agency to invest further in creating a common understanding of its strategy for the future, as well as clear views on potential risk management. This will help to underpin choices (e.g. whether to continue with the accreditation of study programmes outside Latvia) and to develop consistent and convincing proposals for the design the future of internal and external quality assurance in Latvian higher education. The panel encourages the agency to benefit optimally from the broad recognition of its expertise by all national stakeholders to help develop a quality assurance system which is fully fit-for-purpose. As indicated below, it is important that the agency acquires enough funding to play this proactive role.

Although the panel considers the strategic planning of the agency to be too operational, all stakeholders it met recognise that the agency implements its overall ambitions consistently in its daily operations.

Furthermore, the panel considers that the agency has a strong track record in involving stakeholders in its governance and operations. The panel considers that students and social partners are well-represented in nearly all bodies of the agency, as well as in most review panels.

Panel commendations

1. The panel commends the agency for the high level of trust it has gained among all Latvian stakeholders.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. The panel encourages the agency to benefit optimally from the broad recognition of its expertise by all national stakeholders to play a proactive role in designing the future of internal and external quality assurance in Latvian higher education.
2. The panel encourages the agency to analyse whether greater consistency may be achieved in the reporting on its strategic planning, which is currently reported in the public annual report and the annual report to the Ministry of Education and Science separately, while reducing the workload for the agency.
3. The panel recommends to publish the agency's annual reports on its website as soon as they are available.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.2 Official status

> Standard:
>
> Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

Evidence

AIC is a public non-profit foundation which acts in accordance with the Associations and Foundations Law and operates on the basis of its Statutes. The clause 2.1.2. of AIC Statutes prescribes the function of AIC as a quality assurance agency. AIC has established a separate structural unit – Accreditation department, which is known under the name 'Quality Agency for Higher Education' (abbreviation in Latvian – AIKA).

The role and tasks of AIC as a quality assurance agency are defined in the Law on Higher Education Institutions:
  • Section 9. Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions;
  • Section 55.2 Licensing of a Study Programme;
  • Section 55.3 Opening and Accreditation of a Study Field;

and in respective Cabinet regulations (No 793, 794 and 795).

In addition, in 2022 amendments to the Education Law were approved in order to emphasize quality assurance in higher education (Section 20., Paragraph 4), and respectively the role of the agency in quality assurance of higher education.

Analysis

As indicated above, the agency has a clearly established legal basis for its activities in Latvia. The panel discussed extensively the fact that AIC, as legal structure is the organisation which is referred to in the legislation, while AIKA is the department which implements the regulation related to external quality assurance in higher education. The agency invests in the separate communication of AIKA as quality assurance agency and is recognised as such.

The panel had an in-depth exchange with representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science on the role of the agency in external quality assurance in Latvian higher education. It learned that the agency has built a high level of trust with the Ministry, which has led the Latvian legislator to provide the agency with increased freedom to define its own assessment frameworks. Representatives of the Ministry indicated that the higher education sector is gaining trust, and that the Ministry is willing to allow the autonomy of higher education institutions increase over time, but that it will still take time to gain sufficient trust to move completely to institutional accreditation. The panel appreciates the competent and committed approach of the Ministry representatives it met.

The agency's external quality assurance activities abroad are limited to study programme reviews in Ukraine. According to the agency, the Ukrainian legislation recognises the results of EQAR-registered agencies. If the agency would further develop its accreditation activities abroad, it should make sure that its work is recognised by the competent authorities.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

> Standard:
>
> Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

2018 review recommendation

The panel recommends the AIKA executive and the Ministry representatives to continue to support the concept of the new model for institutional review under the remit of AIC/AIKA. There is also a need to ensure that AIKA requires full independence in designing methodologies going forward.

Evidence

Organisational independence

Regulatory enactments guarantee that the agency operates independently and autonomously in the appointment of its governing bodies.

The agency operates as a separate administrative unit within AIC (as a host organisation). According to the self-assessment report, the financial independence from the host organisation is guaranteed by a separate programme in the state budget, which the agency can independently decide how to use.

Operational independence

The main functions of the agency are stated in regulatory enactments, as well as the frameworks for the different assessment procedures (number of reviewers, main evaluation criteria, length of accreditation, etc.). Nevertheless, the agency has received more freedom to further detail review procedures in recent years. Within the criteria defined by the Government, the agency is responsible for developing assessment methodologies, guidelines for self-assessment reports and experts' reports. In the process of developing methodologies and guidelines, the agency works together with different stakeholders, including students and employers, but final approval is the sole responsibility of the agency director.

The main functions and composition, including the election of the chair and the members, of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (Council) and Study Quality Commission (SQC), are stated in Cabinet regulations. The collegial strategic body of the agency is the Council, which consists of eight members representing different stakeholder groups (see 3.1). This Council approves the composition of the Study Quality Commission based on the proposal of the agency, upon an open call. The SQC has seven members, including students and employers' representatives, with experience in organising and ensuring higher education. The composition of the SQC should be balanced as to region and type of higher education institution (private/public, university/college).

The Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes is approved by the chairperson of AIC based on the proposal of the agency. Candidates are selected by open call. This commission includes five members, including students and employers' representatives, with experience in organising and ensuring higher education and representing different fields of science.

The agency conducts its staff recruitment independently. The Head of the agency decides on opening position and decides on the recruitment team that will carry out the interviews. The Head of the agency makes a final decision on the appointment of a new employee based on the recruitment results, and chairperson of the board approve by signing labour agreement. The agency staff cannot take part

in the handling of applications from higher education institutions by which they were employed or had ties with in the last two years.

<u>Independence of formal outcomes</u>

Members of the Study Quality Commission and the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes are not representing their employers (e.g. higher education institutions), but represent the whole field of higher education of Latvia as independent and professional experts. In addition, non-conflict-of-interest principles are set in the Rules of the SQC and Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes.

The Study Quality Commission takes all decisions on the Accreditation of study fields, Licensing of study programmes, Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field and Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields of Latvian higher education institutions.

All experts involved in assessment procedures sign the declaration of no-conflict-of-interest and confidentiality.

In its activities, the implementation of its functions and tasks the agency aims to ensure independence, transparency, neutrality, justification and professionalism by proper selection and training of staff and experts.

Analysis

<u>Organisational independence</u>

The framework for the main decision-making bodies of the agency for all assessment procedures related to activities of Latvian higher education institutions is set in Cabinet regulations. The appointment of the members, is, however, the autonomy of the agency. For the Accreditation of foreign study programmes, the agency is fully independent to appoint members of its Accreditation commission for foreign study programmes. The agency's documentation does not provide information on how and whether members of the Study Quality Commission and the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes may be dismissed.

The panel discussed the legal structure of AIC with AIKA as an independent department in detail. All national stakeholders support this structure that was chosen for efficiency. No new structure was necessary for a higher education quality assurance agency, as an existing structure could host it. Though legislation on foundations requires that some decisions are signed-off by the chair of the board of AIC, interference seems to be minimal in practice. The panel encourages the agency to further search for options to reduce the number of decisions which need to be signed off by the AIC chair to the strict legal minimum.

<u>Operational independence</u>

The agency functions within a highly regulated framework, in which the national Government defines all major characteristics of the external quality assurance framework. Additionally, the state provides a necessary part of the agency's funding. The review panel considers that the highly regulated framework and the fact that these regulations are embedded in legal acts that are usually difficult to change (laws, Cabinet regulations etc.) creates obstacles to be able to react to changes in the higher education sector. The panel recommends the agency therefore, to continue to pursue further increases in its independence.

For the accreditation of study programmes abroad, the agency acts completely independently and autonomously. The activities are based on its registration on EQAR and operational independence, as well as independence of formal outcomes are guaranteed. The agency staff defines the assessment

frameworks and is in charge of the composition of panels, while decisions are made by the independent Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes, of which the members are appointed by the agency itself.

The agency decided to make all decisions on the composition of panels internally, without interference of any governing body. The assessment coordinator makes a proposal, which is sent to the involved higher education institution for verification of any conflict of interest. Panel members also need to sign a declaration of absence of any conflict of interest. Wherever possible, international panel members are involved in panels to add externality into the process, as Latvia has a relatively small higher education system in which many participants know each other so many real or perceived conflicts of interest arise.

<u>Independence of formal outcomes</u>

The agency created a double-layered structure to guarantee independence in decision making. The Higher Education Quality Assurance Council, which is composed of different stakeholders, decides on the composition of the Study Quality Commission, after an open call. The Study Quality Commission is the body which takes all accreditation decisions for Latvian institutions.

Overall, the panel considers that sufficient efforts have been made to guarantee independence in the implementation of external quality assurance processes, the composition of review panels and the decisions on formal outcomes of review procedures.

Furthermore, the agency conducts its staff recruitment independently. The head of the agency makes a final decision on the appointment of a new employee based on the recruitment results, and chairperson of the board approve by signing the labour agreement. The agency staff cannot take part in the handling of applications from higher education institutions by which they were employed or had ties with in the last two years.

Panel recommendations

1. The panel recommends the agency to continue to pursue further increases in its independence from state institutions to define quality assurance procedures and assessment frameworks.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

4. The panel encourages the agency to further search for options to reduce the number of decisions which need to be signed off by the AIC chair to the strict legal minimum.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

2018 review recommendation

The panel recommends the agency consider developing a comprehensive thematic analysis track, which would evolve analysis driven by the general results of the external quality assurance with a focus on strategic improvement for the higher education system.

Evidence

After a first thematic analysis on the external assessment performed in 2016-2017, no further thematic analyses were performed until recently.

In its reaction to the draft report, the agency explained that it planned in 2017 to perform thematic analysis as of 2020. Due to the pandemic Covid-19 and its consequences, the cycle of study field assessments was prolonged by Government decision. As a consequence, study field assessments were not finalised until 2022, and so, the term for development of thematic analysis on study fields was prolonged too. Therefore, thematic analysis on each study field is a novelty that was implemented for the first time at the time of the ENQA review. Reports were being prepared for study fields Psychology, Law, and Information and Communication Sciences. The agency plans to publish these reports on the website of the agency and to disseminate them among stakeholders. The aim of these reports is to summarise the data of study field (including study programmes in the field), to analyse results of evaluation, strong and weak points of each study field identified by experts and highlight the main recommendations provided by the experts.

Analysis

The review panel has been provided with the draft thematic analysis reports. The panel considers that these reports are aligned with the requirements of this standard. They summarize results of several assessment procedures and would make them accessible to the public.

Furthermore, the panel has analysed an analytic report which the agency produced for the Ministry of Education and Science. This report contains statistical data, analysis of the results and recommendations based on the outputs of the quality assurance procedures of the past year. However, this report is not published, and so, it is not accessible to higher education institutions or the broader public. In recent years the agency has integrated some of the information provided in the report to the Ministry also in the public annual report. This is a positive development, as this information is a good basis for thematic analysis. The review panel encourages the agency to share the full analysis for the Ministry in its annual report.

As well as the recent work on thematic analysis reports which are in line with the requirements of this standard, the agency has published evaluation reports on its operations, such as the reports "Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level" (authors A. Kažoka, J. Silka and A. Rauhvargers) and " Impact of ENQA on the development of a national quality assurance system and a quality assurance agency: the Latvian perspective" (authors A. Kažoka and J. Silka), the experiences with the organisation of assessments during Covid-19 times and annual reports, which are relevant for internal quality assurance and public information on the work of the agency. However, those reports are not considered by the panel as thematic analysis reports, because they provide valuable analysis on the external quality assurance system, but are not based on the information on programmes and institutions that the agency gathers in the course of its work and that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system.

Based on the recommendations of the previous ENQA review panel, the agency planned in its strategic plan 2017-2022 to produce a thematic analysis report annually, the agency explained in its reaction to the draft report that its aim was to focus on thematic analysis of study field assessments. Due to Covid-19, those processes were postponed, and therefore, also the production of thematic analysis reports. The review panel considers that the agency should have implemented the recommendation of the previous panel sooner. The agency has performed a lot of other reviews, and has reported to the Government relevant learnings based on those reviews, so it clearly had enough elements at its disposal to share with the higher education community in the form of thematic analysis reports. However, as the agency's plans to publish regular thematic analysis based on its main external quality

assurance process had to be postponed due to Covid-19, and it has recently started to implement this strategy, the panel considers that the agency just meets the minimal standards to comply with this standard.

Panel recommendations

2. The panel recommends to regularly publish thematic analysis reports in line with the first reports which were in preparation at the moment of the ENQA review.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

> Standard:
>
> Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

Evidence

The agency's main revenue consists of the fees paid by higher education institutions for the implementation of assessment procedures. Given that the revenue from paid services is not permanently stable, as well as considering that service fees do not cover the full costs of the implementation of the functions of the agency, a certain amount of the state budget is allocated every year. The state budget covers the costs of the implementation of the functions of the agency in order to ensure sustainability and the independence of the activities of the agency. In the period 2016-2019 an ESF project provided additional funding to the agency. Regarding the potential transition to institutional accreditation the agency may benefit from additional ESF-funding again.

The agency is managed by the Head of the Agency. Furthermore, the agency comprises two Heads of unit, two lawyers, one e-system administrator, one office manager (secretary), two senior experts and nine assessment coordinators. At the time of the review the position of a Deputy Head is open.

Analysis

The review panel has discussed the available financial resources and visited the premises of the agency. The financial contribution by the Latvian Government to the operating costs of the agency have been committed for the coming three years. Additionally, the Government aims to provide a project grant to the agency to invest additional resources in the preparation of a system of institutional accreditation.

The agency received positive feedback from all stakeholders on the commitment and competence of the agency staff. The staff themselves indicated that their workload is high due to the number of reviews which need to be organised. The review panel encourages the agency to reflect on the existing set of external quality assurance procedures in order to assess whether further efficiency gains are possible.

The agency has invested in an online platform (E-platform) to implement accreditation procedures of study fields. Higher education institutions, the agency staff and external experts use this platform for all interactions related to the review. The agency plans to implement the E-platform also for licencing of study programmes from 2023 on. This platform has helped to increase efficiency in the agency. Further implementation and improvement of the platform depends on availability of resources. The panel considers that it would be good to create a user feedback panel in order to decide on priorities

for further development of the E-platform. Review experts indicated that they see the inclusion of a collaborative work environment as a major area for improvement. Indeed, individual panel members need to provide inputs, which are subsequently aggregated, while it would be useful to be able to react on each other's inputs simultaneously.

Overall, the review panel considers that the agency's resources are just sufficient to perform its essential activities. Nevertheless, the agency will clearly need the expected additional resources to prepare for institutional accreditation. It will also need to continue to work efficiently to ensure a sustainable workload for the staff while taking into account the full range of activities of the agency and compliance with all ESG standards.

Furthermore, the panel encourages the agency to reflect timely on the impact on the expected workload of a transition to institutional accreditation, both for the agency and for higher education institutions.

Panel commendations

2. The panel commends the agency for its efforts to increase efficiency in its work through the development of an E-platform.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

5. The review panel encourages the agency to reflect on the existing set of external quality assurance procedures and to assess whether further efficiency gains are possible.
6. The panel encourages the agency to create a user feedback panel in order to decide on priorities for further development of the E-platform.
7. The panel encourages the agency to reflect timely on the impact on the expected workload of a transition to institutional accreditation, both for the agency and for higher education institutions.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

> Standard:
>
> Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

Evidence

The agency has formulated Quality policy which defines the quality as the level to which the Agency can fulfil the requirements of the society and the needs of the stakeholders. In order to improve the working culture and increase the trust of the society, the agency adheres to the rules of professional conduct, including the Code of Ethics (reapproved in 2022).

The agency has developed a quality management manual, which determines the main elements of its quality management system, including a quality policy and quality objectives which are integrated in the activities of the agency. The quality management manual aims to document the activities of the agency in the field of quality management in order to ensure that all the staff of the agency and involved stakeholders have a common understanding, and society is informed about the quality standards of the agency. Information on the principles of the agency's quality policy is available on its website.

The agency has created the Process and Measurement System where the main operating, management and support processes and measurements have been identified. The measurements have been identified based on whether it is possible to evaluate the quality of the process and integrity, as well as to use them for the improvement of the work of the agency.

The Agency has created and implemented quality management system which regulates the daily work of the Agency including the quality assurance processes. The Quality Management System follows the four steps of the PDCA cycle: Plan – Do – Check – Act.

Continuous improvement is based on input gathered from the agency's staff. During weekly meetings and regular meetings between the Head of the Agency and each staff member, there is room given for suggestions for improvement.

Table 4: Stakeholder feedback gathered by the agency (based on SAR, p.41-42)

Feedback provider	Method of acquisition	Actions (examples)
Feedback from the staff of the Agency	• Weekly meetings, in addition there are individual meetings • Annual discussions, including strategic issues • Feedback regarding assessment experts	• In accordance with the recommendations given, the guidelines for the assessment of study fields have been revised • Strengthen the opportunity to attract the most appropriate assessment experts to assessment procedures
Feedback from assessment experts	Survey is filled in after the completion of the assessment procedure	• In accordance with the recommendations given, the guidelines for the assessment of study fields have been revised
Feedback from HEI	Feedback is obtained after the completion of the assessment procedure or after seminars	• Procedural steps are identified that require a change in approach or way of presenting information • Future seminars or informational materials are planned according to the indicated unclarities
SQC	Feedback is received at the meetings	• The way in which information is transferred to the SQC has been improved • Additional information is requested from HEI before decision-making
Other cooperation partners (for example, LDDK, LSA)	Feedback is obtained during the process of discussing draft laws or, in the case of LSA, LDDK, may also be received in the context of assessment experts and clarity of procedures (mostly acquired in everyday communication)	• Procedural steps are identified that require a change in approach or way of presenting information • Considered in the context of Strategy review

In Table 4 the agency summarises the ways in which it gathers stakeholder feedback.

Analysis

The internal quality assurance system of the agency is mainly based on stakeholder feedback. Summaries of the feedback gathered by the agency are reported in the annual report to the Ministry of Education and Science and in the annual report of the agency. This input is used to foster continuous improvement. As indicated in Table 4, uses the gathered feedback to improve its own practices.

Comparing the results of surveys in 2017 and 2021 it is concluded that the work of the agency is valued by its stakeholders (average assessment is between 3,69 and 3,92 out of 4 points). The best

evaluated aspect is effective organisation of communication process among all involved parties (3,92), and that the staff of the agency has managed to ensure clear information/answers (3,85).

In case more fundamental changes are required, the agency involves staff and stakeholders by inviting them to working groups and strategic meetings. Often, fundamental changes can only be made by convincing the Ministry to change Cabinet Regulations or other legal frameworks.

In order to further improve the internal quality assurance system of the agency, it may be useful to complement stakeholder feedback by measuring the outputs of the system, as well as the overall impact on the quality of higher education.

The agency does not outsource any substantial activities.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Standard:

Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

Evidence

The agency underwent an external review in 2017-2018. After this first external review the agency participated in a progress visit, which was organised online due to the Covid-19 restrictions, and submitted its follow-up report in June 2020. It intends to undergo an external review at least once every five years.

Analysis

The agency is committed to undergo an external review every five years in order to demonstrate its compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines.

The agency followed up on some of the recommendations of the 2018 review panel, but did not fully implement the recommendation on reporting back to expert panels in decision making process. As the panel has learned during site visit, experts are normally not invited to Study Quality Commission meetings, and there was no sufficient evidence that experts are getting acquainted with additional requirements or obligations set by Study Quality Commission after the accreditation procedure. The recommendation on thematic analysis has been implemented only recently.

The agency submitted a substantive change report to EQAR in 2021. Given that most of these changes became effective in 2019 and 2020 already, EQAR underlined that AIC should have submitted a change report immediately after the new activities have been developed and the organisational changes have taken effect. The agency also left some compliance issues with the ESG unsolved which were flagged by EQAR based on the substantive change reports submitted by the agency in 2021 and 2022 (student member in integration of licenced programme in study field and appeals procedure for reviews abroad),

Taking into account that the agency is planning a fundamental review of its activities, moving from study field accreditation to institutional accreditation shortly after the 2023 external review, the panel urges the agency to submit a substantive change report to EQAR as soon as the new external quality assurance framework is adopted.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

8. The review panel urges the agency to submit a substantive change report to EQAR as soon as new external quality assurance frameworks have been adopted.
9. The review panel urges the agency to implement recommendations systematically.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

> Standard:
>
> External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

2018 review recommendation

The panel recommends that AIKA implements the new guidelines for self-evaluation reports and joint expert reports and in doing so are mindful of the need to ensure that:
- the standard for information management (ESG 1.7) extends to all three assessment procedures and to ensure they cover the rationale behind the ESG standard;
- the standard for public information (ESG 1.8) and the clarity and objectivity of information about learning outcomes, admission criteria etc. is included for the QA procedure of licencing the study programme.

Evidence

For the Assessment of higher education institutions, licencing of study programmes and the Assessment and accreditation of study fields, the guidelines for the preparation of self-assessment reports and experts' reports are published on the agency's website. For the Accreditation of foreign study programmes, all guidelines are combined in one document. The guidelines for the Accreditation of foreign study programmes are only available in English. All other guidelines are available both in English and Latvian.

The agency's mapping on how its assessment frameworks are aligned with the ESG Part 1 is summarized in Table 5 (Licensing of study programmes, Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Accreditation of higher education institutions) and Table 6 (for Accreditation of foreign institutions).

The agency does not consider the procedure for the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field as a stand-alone process. This process mainly focusses on the progress since licensing of a study programme is evaluated.

The compliance of the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes) has not been mapped against the ESG as the agency does not consider this to be possible due to the nature of this procedure, where only certain aspects (e.g. change of the language of instruction) are reviewed.

Table 5: ESG-mapping, as provided in the self-assessment report, p.45-53

ESG Part I	Licensing of study programmes	Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field	Assessment and accreditation of study fields	Accreditation of higher education institutions
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	*Self-assessment report:* I. Compliance of the Study Programme with the Study Direction (criterion 1.2.) III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.4., 3.5.) Annex 12 Information about the possibilities to continue studies in case the study programme is closed down *The experts report:* III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3., 4.)	*Self-assessment report* Part II: 2. Actuality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.3). *The experts report:* 2. Topicality of the study programme (criteria 1).	*Self-assessment report:* Part I (criteria 1.3., 1.4.) Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 2.1.6., 2.1.2.) • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System • Annex – Analysis of the results of surveys of students, graduates and employers. *The experts report:* Part I: • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (all criteria) – Assessment of requirement No.1. *"Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 2.[1] of the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system"*	*Self-assessment report:* 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.2.). 2. Internal Quality Assurance System. *The experts report:* I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.2.). II. II. Internal Quality Assurance System
1.2. Design and approval of programme	*Self-assessment report:* I. Compliance of the Study Programme with the Study Direction (criteria 1.1., 1.2., 1.3) III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: 1. Indicators describing the Study Programme. 2. Actuality of the study	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.2.). Part III: • Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study	*Self-assessment report:* 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.3., 1.5.). 2. Internal Quality Assurance System (2.5., 2.6.).

	of the Study Programme (all criteria) Annexes, including: • decision by the Senate of HEI or the Council of the college on the creation of the study programme; • Opinion of the institution which performs the certification of persons in the field of regulated professions and at which the higher education institution/ college implements their study programmes (if applicable). *The expert's report:* I. Compliance of the Study Programme with the Study Direction (all criteria) III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 1., 2.,4.).	programme (criteria 2.1.1., 2.1.3., 2.1.4.). *The experts report:* Part II: 1. Indicators describing the Study Programme. 2. Topicality of the study programme.	Programme (criteria 3.1.2.) • Chapter 3.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 3.2.1., 3.2.3., 3.2.4., 3.2.5.). Annexes, including: • Mapping of the study courses/ modules for the achievement of the learning outcomes of the study programme; • The curriculum of the study programme (for each type and form of the implementation of the study programme); • Description of the organisation of the internship of the students (if applicable). *The experts report:* Part I: • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.2., 1.2.4.). Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 2.1.1., 2.1.2., 2.1.3.) • Chapter 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 2.2.1., 2.2.3.m 2.2.4, 2.2.5).	*The experts report:* I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (3.,5.). II. II. Internal Quality Assurance System (5.,6.)
1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	*Self-assessment report:* III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.2., 3.3.,3.4., 3.5.) Annexes, including: • Procedures/ regulations developed by the higher education institution/ college	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: 2. Topicality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.2., 2.1.3., 2.1.4.). *The experts report:* 2. Topicality of the study	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 2.1.5.) • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.3., 2.2.4.) Part III: • Chapter 3.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 3.2.1., 3.2.3.)	*Self-assessment report:* 2. Internal Quality Assurance System (2.6.). 3. Resources (3.4.) *The experts report:* II. Internal Quality Assurance System (6.) III. Resources (4.)

	for the recognition of competences acquired outside formal education or through professional experience and learning outcomes achieved in previous learning; • Contracts of intent of the employers with regard to the provision of traineeships for students (if applicable). *The experts report:* III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (all criteria)	programme.	Annexes, including: • Descriptions of the study courses/ modules; • Main internal regulatory enactments and regulations (for instance, the Constitution of the higher education institution or the Statute of the college, the Code of • Ethics, study regulations, etc.) *The experts report:* Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.5.) • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.3., 1.2.4.) Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 2.1.2.). • Chapter 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 2.2.1, 2.2.3., 2.2.4.). • Chapter 2.5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme.	
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	*Self-assessment report:* III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (all criteria). ** If the study programme is to be implemented in the form of distance learning and/or in a branch of the HEI/ college, analysis is provided view of the form of distance learning and/or the branches.* Annexes, including:	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: Part II: 1. Indicators describing the Study Programme. 2. Topicality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.4.). *The experts report:* 1. Indicators describing the Study Programme (criteria 2., 3.)	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 2.1.4.) • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.4.). • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 2.3.8.). Part III: • Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 3.1.2., 3.1.4.). Annexes, including:	*Self-assessment report:* 2. Internal Quality Assurance System (2.6.). Annexes: • Procedures for the recognition of competences acquired outside formal education or through professional experience and learning outcomes achieved in previous learning. • Sample of the diploma and its supplement to be issued for

	• Procedures/ regulations developed by the higher education institution/ college for the recognition of competences acquired outside formal education or through professional experience and learning outcomes achieved in previous learning. *The experts report:* III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (all criteria).		• A sample of the diploma and its supplement to be issued for completing the study programme. *The experts report:* Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.4.). • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.4.). • Chapter 1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 1.5.3.) Part II.: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 2.1.2., 2.1.4). • Chapter 2.5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme	the acquisition of the study programme. • Document certifying that the Constitution of the higher education institution or By-Laws of the college have been approved. *The experts report:* II. Internal Quality Assurance System (6.) VIII. Compliance of the Activities of the Higher Education Institution/ College with the Provisions of Regulatory Enactments.
1.5. Teaching staff	*Self-assessment report:* II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (criterion 2.4.) IV. Teaching Staff (all criteria) *The experts report:* IV. Teaching Staff	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: 3. Resources and provision (criteria 3.2.). *The experts report:* 3. Resources and provision (requirement 2)	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field 2.3.5., 2.3.6., 2.3.7.) • Chapter 2.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 2.4.2., 2.4.4., 2.4.5., 2.4.6.) Part III: • Chapter 3.4. Teaching Staff *The experts report:* Part I: • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System – Assessment of requirement No.1. • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 1.3.5., 1.3.6., 1.3.7.) • Chapter 1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 1.4.2., 1.4.4., 1.4.5., 1.4.6.). Part II:	*Self-assessment report:* 4. Teaching Staff 6. Cooperation and Internationalisation (6.3.) *The experts report:* IV. Teaching Staff VI. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 3)

			• Chapter 2.4. Teaching Staff.	
1.6. Learning resources and student support	**Self-assessment report:** II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (all criteria) *If the study programme is to be implemented in the form of distance learning and/or in a branch of the HEI/ college, analysis is provided view of the form of distance learning and/or the branches.* **The experts report:** II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme	**Self-assessment report:** Part II: 3. Resources and provision (criteria 3.1.). **The experts report:** 3. Resources and provision (requirement 1)	**Self-assessment report:** Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 2.1.3.) • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (all criteria) Part III: • Chapter 3.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (all criteria). **The experts report:** Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.3). • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (all criteria) Part II: • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (all criteria) • Assessment of the requirement No.6 *"Compliance of the study provision, science provision (if applicable), informative provision (including library), material and technical provision and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes".*	**Self-assessment report:** 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.6.).3. Resources (3.4., 3.5.) 7. Activities of Students' Self-Governance **The experts report:** 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (6) III. Resources (4., 5.) VII. Activities of Students' Self-Governance
1.7. Information management	**Self-assessment report:** II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (criterion 2.1., 2.2., 2.4.) III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criterion 3.4., 3.5.).	**Self-assessment report:** Part II: 2. Topicality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.4., 2.1.5.). **The experts report:** 2. Topicality of the study	**Self-assessment report:** Part I: criteria 1.1. Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (2.1.2.); • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.3., 2.2.4.)	**Self-assessment report:** 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.1., 1.3., 1.4., 1.5., 1.6., 1.7.). 3. Resources (3.4., 3.5.). Annexes: • Outcome of the surveys

	If the study programme is to be implemented in the form of distance learning and/or in a branch of the HEI/ college, analysis is provided view of the form of distance learning and/or the branches. **The experts report:** III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.4., 3.5.).	programme.	• Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field 2.3.2., 2.3.3., 2.3.4., 2.3.8.) • Chapter 2.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 2.4.5.) • Chapter 2.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 2.5.3.) Part III: • Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 3.1.3., 3.1.4.) • Chapter 3.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 3.2.6.) • Chapter 3.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (all criteria) Annex: Analysis of the results of surveys of students, graduates and employers. **The Experts report:** Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.2). • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.3., 1.2.4.). • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 1.3.2., 1.3.3., 1.3.4., 1.3.8.). • Chapter 1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 1.4.5.). • Chapter 1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 1.5.3). Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 2.1.4.). • Chapter 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 2.2.6). • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (criteria all criteria)	conducted among the students • Outcome of the surveys conducted among the employers **The experts report:** I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1., 3., 4., 5., 6., 7.) III. Resources (4., 5.).

1.8. Public information	Self-assessment report: III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.4., 3.5.).	Self-assessment report: Part II: 4. Implementation of the recommendation received in the licensing of the study programme (applicable if the recommendations provided are consistent to this standard). The experts report: 4. Implementation of the recommendations received during the licensing of the study programme.	Self-assessment report: Part II: • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.5.) The Experts report: Part I: • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.5.)	Self-assessment report: 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.7.) The Experts report: 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (7.)
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Self-assessment report: III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.4., 3.5.). II.3. Involvement of the society in the design and continuous development of the programme II.4. Involvement of students in the design and continuous development of the programme The experts report: III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3., 4).	Self-assessment report: Part II: 2. Topicality of the study programme The experts report: 2. Topicality of the study programme	Self-assessment report: Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (2.1.5.); • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.4.) • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 2.3.8.) Part III: • Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 3.1.1. 3.1.3.) • Chapter 3.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (all criteria) Annex: Analysis of the results of surveys of students, graduates and employers. The experts report: Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.5.).	Self-assessment report: 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.5., 1.6.) 2. Internal Quality Assurance System (2.3., 2.5.,2.6.) The experts report: 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (5., 6.) II. Internal Quality Assurance System (3., 5., 6.)

		• Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.4.). • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 1.3.8.). Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (all criteria). • Chapter 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (all criteria).	
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	Within two years after starting the implementation of the study programme, the study programme must be included in the accredited study field.	*Self-assessment report:* Part II. 4. Implementation of the recommendation received in the licensing of the study programme (applicable if the recommendations provided are consistent with quality systems and policy issues). *The experts report:* 4. Implementation of the recommendations received during the licensing of the study programme.	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: Chapter 2.6. Implementation of the Recommendations Received During the Previous Assessment Procedures (all criteria) *The experts report:* Part I: • Chapter 1.6. Implementation of the Recommendations Received During the Previous Assessment Procedures. • Assessment of the requirement No.4 *"Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided"*

(continuing column 5)

Self-assessment report:

Information about the Results of Inspections Carried out by the State Education Quality Service and Deficiencies Eliminated in the Reported Period

The experts report:

VIII. Compliance of the Activities of the Higher Education Institution/
College with the Provisions of Regulatory Enactments

Table 6: ESG-mapping Accreditation of foreign study programmes, as provided in the self-assessment report, p.53-56

ESG Part 1	Guidelines for self-evaluation reports by higher education institutions and for expert reports
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	1. Strategy, aims and programme management. • Aims of the study programme and their compliance with the strategic directions of the higher education institution • Structure for programme management, including the involved parties/ individuals and their responsibilities • Structure for student participation in programme management • SWOT (strengths – weaknesses – opportunities – threats) analysis of the study programme 9. Employability of graduates. • Coherence of study programme's goals with the labour market needs (regional, local) • Mechanisms for involvement of employers in the management and development of study programme
1.2. Design and approval of programme	1. Strategy, aims and programme management. • Economic and social grounds for establishing the study programme 2. Structure and content of the programme. • The content of study programme, including the compulsory and elective subjects • The relevance of the content of study programme and compliance with the needs of labour market • Interrelation of different study courses, the relation between the aims of study courses and the intended outcomes of study programme • The relation between the study courses and internship • The topics of graduate qualification works.
1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	4. Techniques and methods of educational activity. • Process for development and principles for application of teaching methods • Process for development and principles for application of student evaluation methods • Academic integrity principles, including the use of plagiarism detection tools • Implementation of student-centred approach in the learning and teaching process 8. Research work. • Directions of scientific research of teaching staff and students • Scientific activities performed by teaching staff and students (publications, participation in scientific projects 10. Student services. • Support mechanisms available for students, including the support provided during the study process, as well as career and psychological support by specifying the support to be provided to specific student groups (for instance, students from abroad, part-time students, distance-learning students, students with special needs, etc.)
1.4. Student	1. Strategy, aims and programme management.

admission, progression, recognition and certification	• System and procedures for admission of students, including the mechanisms for recognition of prior learning 4. Techniques and methods of educational activity. • Mobility of students
1.5. Teaching staff	5. Teaching staff. • Procedures for attracting and/or employing qualified teaching staff • Compliance of the qualification of teaching staff with conditions for implementation of study programme • Procedures for improving the qualification of teaching staff • Ratio between the academic and research workload of teaching staff • Mobility of teaching staff • Cooperation of teaching staff in implementation of the study programme 6. Cooperation and internationalisation. • System and procedures for attracting teaching staff and students from abroad 8. Research work. • Directions of scientific research of teaching staff and students • Scientific activities performed by teaching staff and students (publications, participation in scientific projects • Relation between research work and study process, including the description and assessment of the use of the outcomes in the study process
1.6. Learning resources and student support	3. Teaching and learning materials. • Process for development and updating of teaching materials • Relevance and quality of the available teaching materials • Availability of methodical guides for all disciplines and all types of activities – internships, course projects, diploma projects 4. Techniques and methods of educational activity. • Application of e-learning activity 6. Cooperation and internationalisation. • Strategy for cooperation and internationalisation. • Cooperation with institutions in Ukraine and abroad (higher education institutions, municipalities, non-governmental organisations, scientific institutes), selection of cooperation partners 7. Resources. • The availability, quality and sustainability of financial resources • The availability, quality and sustainability of material and technical resources (premises, equipment etc.) • The availability, quality and sustainability of methodological and informative resources (library, databases, online tools (Moodle) etc.) • The use of information and communication technologies in implementation of the study programme 10. Student services.

	• Support mechanisms available for students, including the support provided during the study process, as well as career and psychological support by specifying the support to be provided to specific student groups (for instance, students from abroad, part-time students, distance-learning students, students with special needs, etc.)
1.7. Information management	1. Strategy, aims and programme management. • System for internal monitoring, development and review of study programme, including the system for receiving and using the feedback of stakeholders, the use of key-performance indicators (KPI) 9. Employability of graduates. • Statistics on employment of graduates, including the analysis of demand, workplace (field), average pay • Outcomes of surveys for employers and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme • Outcomes of surveys for graduates and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme
1.8. Public information	7. Resources. • The availability of public information on the study programme
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	1.Strategy, aims and programme management. • System for internal monitoring, development and review of study programme, including the system for receiving and using the feedback of stakeholders, the use of key-performance indicators (KPI) 9. Employability of graduates. • Outcomes of surveys for employers and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme • Outcomes of surveys for graduates and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	Accreditation of foreign study programmes ends with a formal decision on accreditation term. The accreditation certificate is awarded for a defined period, thus imposing that accreditation has to be repeated after this period.

Analysis

The agency has developed guidelines for the preparation of the self-assessment report, including the template for the SAR, as well as guidelines for the experts' report, including the assessment framework for:
  • Accreditation of higher education institutions;
  • Licensing of study programmes;
  • Assessment and accreditation of study fields;
  • Inclusion of a licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field.

The review panel noticed that the chapters and sub-chapters are in the guidelines for institutions and those presented in the guidelines for experts are not always identical for Licensing of study programmes, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Inclusion of a licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field is explicitly linked to the assessment criteria which are set-out in the guidelines for experts. E.g., for Licencing of study programmes the guidelines for the Self-assessment report are organised differently for III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme compared to the assessment framework for the expert panel. Nor is the numbering of the assessment criteria identical. It would be helpful to further align the guidelines for institutions and experts. The panel suggests to align the template for the self-assessment reports with the template for the experts' reports Licensing of study programmes, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Inclusion of a licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, using the same wording for the assessment criteria, subdivision and numbering. This would increase the transparency of the assessment frameworks and reduce the risk of inconsistencies.

Based on the mapping grid above and the guidelines provided by the agency, the review panel has analysed the alignment of the agency's standards with the ESG Part 1. Overall, the evaluation criteria reflect all ESG standards' core elements. In the assessment frameworks, a criterion is integrated which reads as follows "The study programme meets the standards set forth in Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)." In order to guide expert panels, the panel considers it necessary that the separate ESG are reflected in individual assessment criteria. In the following paragraphs, the panel's analysis of the compliance with ESG Part 1 is discussed in detail. The references to individual standards provided by the agency in the ESG mapping table above are not always accurate (e.g. the mapping grid for Licencing of new programmes refers to Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criterion 3.5.) of the guidelines for experts' reports, which does not exist in the published guidelines) and often refer also to elements which only sideways relate to the mentioned ESG. The agency should review the table and make sure that all references are correct.

For the Accreditation of foreign study programmes, all guidelines, including the assessment framework, are integrated in one document.

For the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields, no public guidelines are available, beyond the information provided in the relevant Cabinet Regulations. It is up to each higher education institution to justify the need for the proposed changes. The elements to be considered, such as change in language of implementation or entry requirements, are listed in the application by the higher education institution and confirmed by the AIKA. The agency considers it impossible to predict the set of changes submitted by the higher education institution. Therefore the agency chooses not to provide unified guidelines like for other procedures. The agency indicates that in each case it is explained to experts what they should assess during training depending on what kind of changes (or set of changes) are submitted by the higher education institution. The review panel recognises that this procedure "does not independently cover all requirements of the ESG Part 2. It only covers the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or

accreditation of study field." (Terms of Reference of this review). The panel considers, however, that the agency should guarantee that those elements which are fundamentally changed compared to the previous review are assessed, in order to guarantee that the programme under review stays compliant with the agency's own assessment frameworks and the ESG Part 1 standards. The panel considers is perfectly acceptable that the review relies on the outcomes of the previous review for those standards which are not influenced by the changes. When a programme adds an English language variant, is the review panel considers it, e.g., crucial to check whether student admission procedures are ready for international student intake, teaching staff is capable to teach in English, student support can be offered for international students and public information is available in English. The panel discussed this topic with relevant stakeholders and assessed several expert reports. Based on this analysis the panel concludes that several relevant ESG Part 1 are clearly omitted in the expert's reports. In a report on an English language variant, no reference was made to student and (international) stakeholder involvement or public information in English. For another programme, which wanted to broaden its entry requirements and allow new groups of students, adding half a year of study, no reference is made to the required teaching staff, or the availability of learning resources for a potentially substantially increasing student population. Based on this analysis, the review panel considers that the guidance provided by the agency to the review expert is clearly insufficient to guarantee a consistent application of the ESG Part 1 standards within this procedure. The panel urges the agency to implement the necessary measures in order to ensure that the assessment of changes considers all relevant ESG in order to guarantee that the study field stays ESG-compliant upon implementation of the proposed changes. It is up to the agency to decide how it guarantees ESG-compliance of this procedure. One way would be to use the framework for study field assessments and define for each Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields-procedure, based on the information elements provided by the higher education institution, which standards of this framework need to be re-assessed by the expert. Because of the absence of an assessment framework, the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields is not considered in the following analysis per ESG Part 1.

ESG 1.1 Policy for quality assurance

Most of the agency's standards are in line with the ESG. Several standards require institutions to have internal quality assurance processes in place. In the Institutional accreditation and the Assessment and accreditation of a study field, it is required that the internal quality assurance policy is made public. This is not required separately in the Licencing of new study programmes. As public information about the quality assurance is difficult to assess ex-ante, the panel considers that this element should be checked within the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field framework.

In most of the agency's assessment frameworks external stakeholder involvement is mentioned explicitly. In the framework for Institutional accreditation, a separate standard is dedicated to the requirements of the labour market and one to student's self-governance. The panel considers it relevant to integrate the latter aspect more explicitly in the other procedures for all higher education institutions in Latvia.

In the framework for the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field the only aspect of the internal quality assurance policy which is assessed is the implementation of the recommendations received during the licensing of the study programme. As this process is implemented within two years after the licencing process, the panel considers that this element is sufficiently covered in conjunction with the licensing procedure, Except for the above mentioned check of public information.

In the framework for the Accreditation of foreign study programmes a system for internal monitoring is required, including stakeholder feedback and student participation in programme management. It is not required to make this policy public.

ESG 1.2 Design and approval of programmes

The Licencing of new study programmes procedure is focused on the design and approval of new programmes. It includes specific standards on this topic, focussing on the intended learning outcomes. Also the review framework for the Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Institutional accreditation include explicit references to processes for the design and approval of new programmes In the framework for the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, no reference is made to processes for the design and approval of study programmes. As this process is implemented within two years after the licencing process, the panel considers that this element is sufficiently covered in conjunction with the licensing procedure.

The accreditation of foreign study programmes framework does not explicitly refer to the design and approval of the programme. Nevertheless, it refers to a range of relevant elements of the design of the programme under review.

In none of the agency's assessment frameworks, explicit reference is made to the national qualification framework for higher education, nor to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. The agency does not consider this to be necessary because compliance with the Latvian Qualification Framework is required by the Law on Higher Education Institutions (Section 55, 1.[1]) which prescribes that study programmes shall be in compliance with Latvian Qualifications Framework. This also includes alignment with EQF, which levels are described in Cabinet regulations no.322, and assessment frameworks require higher education institutions be compliant with national regulations. The review panel, however, considers that it would be helpful to include explicit references to the national qualification framework in each assessment framework, in order to guarantee that external experts assess explicitly whether the educational practices are in line with the legal requirements concerning the Latvian Qualification Framework.

ESG 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Student-centred learning and teaching principles are mentioned in most of the agency's assessment frameworks. However, the aspect of students taking an active role in their learning process is not mentioned explicitly. In the framework for the Inclusion of a study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, student-centred learning is not reflected at all.

While some standards refer to the attainment of intended learning outcomes, the assessment frameworks do not contain specific references to student-centred assessment of students. In the Guidelines for the Self-Assessment Report for Licencing of study programmes and in the Guidelines for the Self-Assessment Report and the Joint Expert's report for the Assessment and accreditation of study fields a specific criterion refers to the methods and procedures for the evaluation of students' achievements. However, the panel considers it to be important to focus more on assessment policies, including a focus on student-centred assessment in all review procedures.

ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Institutional accreditation, licencing of study programmes as well as assessment and accreditation of study fields frameworks are generally in line with this standard. The recognition of periods of study and prior learning are assessed, as well as compliance with the legal requirements on diplomas and professional recognition are considered.

The framework for Accreditation of foreign study programmes assesses the procedures for admission of students, including the mechanisms for recognition of prior learning, and the support for international mobility.

The agency's frameworks do not refer explicitly to the follow-up of study progression, except for the framework for Inclusion of a study programme on the accreditation form of a study field in which the dynamics of the student population and the employment prospects of graduates are discussed.

As AIKA is a department within AIC, which is a Latvian ENIC/NARIC centre, this enables the dialogue and sharing practices seeking strong links between quality assurance and recognition of qualifications, which becomes very relevant while shaping or reviewing quality assurance procedures (e.g. new type of institutional review from 2026) and external reviews and including training.

ESG 1.5 Teaching staff

The agency's standards include all relevant aspects of this standard. Requirements on the minimum quality of teaching staff, their qualifications, research and foreign language skills are directly based on legal provisions for Latvian institutions. Also, in the Accreditation of foreign study programmes framework all relevant elements relating to teaching staff are considered.

ESG 1.6 Learning resources and student support

The agency's standards generally include relevant aspects of student support, information provision and financial and material resources.

ESG 1.7 Information management

The frameworks for Licencing new study programmes, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Accreditation of foreign study programmes and Institutional accreditation frameworks refer explicitly to the collection, analysis and use of statistical data and relevant stakeholder feedback. The agency has reformulated it the criteria in the Licencing of new study programmes framework, in order to take into account the recommendation of the previous review panel.

ESG 1.8 Public information

In the Assessment of study fields and Accreditation of foreign study programmes and the Institutional accreditation frameworks, public information is assessed, including explicit reference to the provision of information in all languages in which study programmes are implemented. Within the procedure for Licencing of study programmes no reference to public information is made because the legislation does not allow higher education institutions to publish any information about the programme before the licencing decision is taken. The procedure for Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field is specifically designed to an activity which is complementary to the Licencing of a study programme to cover those elements of the programme and the European Standards and Guidelines which are difficult to assess in an ex-ante procedure. The review panel considers it, therefore, specifically relevant to assess how the institution guarantees public information within this procedure.

ESG 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

In the frameworks for Licencing of study programmes, Assessment and accreditation of study fields, Institutional accreditation, and Accreditation of foreign study programmes frameworks on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes are assessed. Furthermore, each institution is expected to gather stakeholder feedback not only in the design phase of the programme, but also in the implementation phase. In the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field no reference is made to on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes.

ESG 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

The individual assessment frameworks do not refer to the cyclical nature of external quality assurance, but the total of compulsory procedures for Latvian higher education institutions, ensures the cyclical nature of external quality assurance. New institutions are required to undergo an institutional accreditation procedure once. Once an institution is set-up, study programmes and fields are assessed regularly. New programmes need to be licenced before they are implemented and a specific procedure is in place to include a new study programme on the accreditation form of a study field within two years after the first implementation.

The assessment process for foreign study programmes is a voluntary process, which leads to an accreditation for a fixed period. If the institution wants this accreditation to be renewed, it needs to undergo a new assessment. As this is a voluntary process, the agency does not have any additional lever to guarantee that the institution undertakes cyclical external quality assurance.

Conclusion

The panel is confident that the agency's main procedures Institutional accreditation, Licencing of new study programmes and Assessment and accreditation of study fields consider the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes in higher education institutions as described in Part 1 of the ESG sufficiently. Based on its own analysis of the assessment frameworks and reports, the analysis provided by the agency, and the input from the interviews during the site visit, therefore the review panel concludes that those assessment frameworks are in line with the ESG.

The procedure for Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field does not cover all standards. However, as this process is implemented within two years after the licencing process, the panel considers it sufficient to check only the ESG which are mostly affected by the implementation of the programme, taking into account the above-mentioned recommendations.

As indicated above, no criteria have been developed for the procedure to assess changes within an accredited study field. Nevertheless, the legislation requires that significant changes are assessed externally by an expert. The panel acknowledges that changes such as the addition of a full semester of study to accommodate students with a different type of prior education or in order to comply with additional professional standards or the decision to add a language variant to a programme to attract foreign students, are significant changes. As far as the legislative framework requires the agency to perform an ESG-compliant external assessment of this kind of changes, and as it involves an independent expert, the panel considers that the agency should guarantee that the review process covers all relevant ESG. Due to the insufficient guidelines on the criteria for external assessment, and based on several expert's reports, the panel considers that this process is not ESG-compliant.

Although the procedure for Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields is non-compliant with this ESG standard, the review panel has applied the required proportionality, and taken into account that all major review processes are compliant with the Standard. It, therefore, considers that the agency is partially compliant with this standard. The overall interpretation of the ESG standard is correct, but the manner of implementation is not consistent over all of the agency's procedures.

Panel recommendations

3. The panel urges the agency to define an assessment framework in order to ensure that the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields considers all relevant standards of ESG Part 1 in order to guarantee that the study field stays ESG-compliant upon implementation of the proposed changes.
4. The panel recommends to mention the requirement of a public quality assurance policy (ESG 1.1) explicitly in the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a

study field and the Accreditation of foreign study programmes frameworks, the national qualification framework (ESG 1.2) in each assessment framework, focus more on assessment policies in all assessment frameworks, including a focus on student-centred assessment (ESG 1.3), and to add reference to public information (ESG 1.8) in the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field framework.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

10. The panel suggests to align the template for the self-assessment reports with the template for the experts' reports Licensing of study programmes, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Inclusion of a licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, using the same subdivision and numbering. The panel suggests to consider to integrate the student self-governance more explicitly in the agency's cyclical procedures (ESG 1.1).

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

2018 review recommendation

The recently revised QA guidelines are a good improvement and well received. Improvement is a continuous cycle and the panel encourage AIKA to continue to evolve to ensure that all methodologies continue to be fit the purpose. In doing so AIKA should define each individual procedure more clearly including any potential relationship between them.

Evidence

The assessment methodologies developed by the agency aim to emphasise the autonomy and responsibility of the higher education institution. When organising the assessment procedures, the agency takes into account the specific context of the higher education institution mainly through the composition of the experts group. In case of assessing colleges or first level (short cycle) professional higher education study programmes the expert groups include practitioners rather than highly qualified scientists. Also, when assessing the quality of science and research in a college or a first level (short cycle) professional higher education study programme, the expert groups focus more on the applied research rather than on science.

Stakeholder involvement in the development and implementation of external evaluation procedures is ensured in several ways: by participating in drafting procedure proposals and supporting documentation; by implementing procedures, and by providing feedback on the quality of procedures during and after the completion of each assessment. Collected feedback is used to continuously improve the quality of external evaluation procedures, especially when planning further development of QA system.

Analysis

The panel has extensively discussed the fitness for purpose of the individual review frameworks and the whole system of external quality assurance with all stakeholders in the Latvian higher education system. The panel has learned that the level of trust between higher education institutions, the Government and the broader public is growing, but remains relatively low. This leads to a heavily regulated external quality assurance framework, with limited room for the agency to develop, review and update its processes, and thus to reduce the workload for the higher education institutions and for its own staff.

The current assessment frameworks for Accreditation of higher education institutions, Licensing of study programmes, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Inclusion of a licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, include checks on compliance with a broad range of regulatory requirements (e.g. format of diploma supplements). The panel learned during different meetings that checking legislative requirements encourages the external experts to focus on compliance, rather than improvement. Although the agency supports experts in the assessment of such requirements, the panel encourages the agency to discuss with higher education institutions and the Ministry whether such requirements may be checked in a more efficient manner, allowing the peer review processes to focus more on improvement.

All stakeholders hope that a transition to institutional accreditation may lead to a framework which is more based on trust and autonomy of higher education institutions. Many stakeholders believe that such a system may reduce the workload of external quality assurance. The review panel learned that the Ministry is willing to increase the autonomy of higher education institutions, but that it also expects that institutions provide sufficient evidence that they are ready to take the full responsibility for the quality of their education. The panel encourages the agency to develop a clear vision on the future of external quality assurance in higher education in Latvia, and to develop a workplan together with institutions and the Ministry which defines the steps which need to be taken in order to build the necessary trust to be able to implement institutional accreditation.

The panel has assessed the set of external quality assurance procedures. As already indicated by the previous ENQA panel, it considers that the potential relationship between the different procedures needs to be made more explicit. While the panel values the combination of study field and study programme reviews, it considers that there is still room for improvement in order to reduce the workload by better defining which elements should be assessed at programme level, and which ones are assessed at study field level.

The panel has learned that the agency assesses the quality of all programmes under review, from college education (EQF 5) to doctoral studies (EQF 8), with the same assessment frameworks, with only a limited number of adaptations for doctoral education. Although the agency adapts the composition of the panels to the kinds of programmes under assessment, most stakeholders expressed their doubt about the fitness for purpose of the current assessment frameworks to assess the quality of doctoral education. The panel encourages the agency to assess whether it may be able to adapt its assessment frameworks within the current legislation to make the assessment of doctoral education more fit for purpose. Additionally, the panel encourages the agency to develop a clear vision on how external evaluation from an education perspective and the evaluation of research may be streamlined in the framework of institutional accreditation in order to avoid to sustain a double system, creating a high workload for the institutions.

Although, as mentioned above, the panel considers there is room for improvement in order to make the system better fit for purpose, the panel sees progress and considers the system sufficiently fit for purpose taking into account the regulatory framework. Concerning the lack of procedure for the

Assessment of feasibility on changes in a study field, the panel refers to its remarks under ESG 2.1 and 2.4.

The accreditation of study programmes abroad is developed to cope with requests from Ukrainian higher education institutions. The agency communicates with the relevant national agency in order to understand the national context and national legislation better. In addition, local experts are involved in the review panels in order to take the national context into account. Overall, the review panel considers this process fit for purpose. The panel understood that due to legal requirements separate methodologies and decision-making procedures needed to be set-up for the accreditation of study programmes abroad. As the panel assumes that foreign institutions work with the agency because of its track record in Latvia, the panel searched for consistency between the Latvian procedures and the ones designed for foreign study programmes. As far as it could assess this consistency, the agency is doing its best to guarantee consistency as far as possible taking into account the limitations set by the Latvian legal frameworks.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

11. The panel encourages the agency to develop a clear vision on the future of external quality assurance in higher education in Latvia, including the relation between teaching and research reviews, and to develop a workplan together with institutions and the Ministry which defines the steps which need to be taken in order to grow the necessary trust to be able to implement cyclical institutional accreditation.
12. The panel encourages the agency to discuss with higher education institutions and the Ministry to further make the agency's current review processes more fit for purpose.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up

Evidence

Pre-defined and published procedures

The agency has developed a set of methodologies, including a general methodology document, as well as guidelines for the preparation of the self-assessment report and for the experts' report for core assessment procedures, which are published on the agency's website:
- Accreditation of higher education institutions;
- Licensing of study programmes:
- Assessment and accreditation of study fields:
- Inclusion of a licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field

For the Accreditation of foreign study programmes, all guidelines are integrated in one document.

For the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields, no guidelines are provided, beyond the information provided in the relevant Cabinet Regulations.

<u>Self-assessment report</u>

Higher education institutions are required to submit an application and a self-assessment report or an equivalent document for all assessment procedures. The documents are submitted in Latvian, but for the Assessment and accreditation of study fields, Institutional accreditation and Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field a translation in English is submitted as well.

The templates of the self-assessment report for the Licensing, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Institutional accreditation, Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field and Accreditation of foreign study programmes are available on the website of the agency.

For the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields there is no template provided. Institutions are required to describe the current situation and the initiated changes, including justification and relevant annexes, if needed.

<u>External assessment</u>

An assessment visit is performed by external experts. The number of the experts and composition of the group depends on the type of assessment and is defined by Government regulations. Considering the circumstances caused by the Covid-19, amendments to the assessment procedure methodologies were made in 2020, defining that assessment visits can be organised in different ways – on-site, fully or partially remotely.

Usually, the length of site visit is 2 - 5 days depending on the number of programmes in the study field. For licensing of a new study programmes the usual site visit is one day. During site visits there are meetings with the management of the institution, and/or the respective department, the team that has prepared the self-assessment report, the teaching staff, students, graduates, and the representatives of the employers and/or professional organisations.

The working language is in principle Latvian, but for the Assessment and accreditation of study fields, Institutional accreditation, Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field, and Accreditation of study programmes abroad it is English.

<u>Report</u>

For all assessment processes, reports are prepared and published (see 2.6).

<u>Follow-up</u>

In order to motivate higher education institutions to consider recommendations and take actions following recommendations given by experts, institutions are required to prepare and submit information on the planned activities for the implementation of the recommendations given by assessment experts before the Study Quality Commission takes a decision.

If strong recommendations are given within the framework of the assessment procedures, the Study Quality Commission may impose 'tasks'. In such case, institutions are required to submit information regarding the implementation of those recommendations within a short period of time. The assessment coordinators monitor that the institution submits the necessary information and it is then forwarded to the Study Quality Commission. In other cases, the implementation of recommendations is assessed in the next study field assessment procedure as one of the assessment criteria.

In the event that the study field is accredited for two years, the higher education institution shall, within six months since the decision on the accreditation of the study field has been taken, electronically submit to the agency a report on the implementation of the recommendations.

In the event that the study field is accredited for six years, the higher education institution/college shall, within two years since the decision on the accreditation of the study field has been taken, electronically submit a report on the implementation of the recommendations.

After receiving information on institutions activities for the improvement of the study field, as well as other information on the implementation of studies in the relevant study field, the agency reviews the information. In cases where significant deficiencies have been detected, the agency informs the Study Quality Commission, which, in critical cases, can decide on further activities. Currently no cases have been identified that would require a review of the accreditation decisions.

For the accreditation of foreign study programmes a similar approach is implemented. The institution is required to report on implementation of expert recommendations before the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes takes decision. The Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes has the mandate to request further follow-up within a certain period of time. If the agency is selected for the next accreditation, the institutions will be requested to provide a full report on implementation of the recommendations.

<u>Reliable, useful and consistent implementation</u>

The main principles defined by the agency state that everyone involved in the assessment procedure has to abide by being unbiased and fact based, neutral, respectful towards the persons involved in the assessment process, confidential and cooperative. This applies not only to the staff of the agency but also to the governing and decision-making bodies, experts and other individuals involved in the activities of the agency.

The agency refers in its self-assessment report to the following tools and methods it implements in order to achieve external quality assurance processes that are reliable and consistent:
   • preparation and publication of methodological tools (methodologies, guidelines for institutions on preparing the self-assessment reports and for experts on preparing the experts' reports);
   • organising informative meetings for institutions on the existing external quality assurance framework and changes in it;
   • providing specific consultations to institutions about the methodology and preparation of the self-assessment reports;
   • carefully selecting the experts for participation in assessment procedures and composing balanced experts' groups that represent the views of all stakeholders' groups;
   • providing systematic training for experts included in the database and in addition a specific training for all experts involved in each assessment procedure;
   • ensuring consistency in applying the methodology in separate assessment procedures with the help of the agency's assessment coordinator who is assigned to support each procedure;
   • if the procedure is organised by a new assessment coordinator, an experienced colleague is involved to ensure a uniform approach to the assessment procedures;
   • for assessment of study fields using the E-platform, where information is collected and included on an equal basis. E-platform training and methodological and technical support is provided to institutions.

Analysis

The procedure the Licencing of study programmes includes a self-evaluation process, a site-visit by experts and a review report that is publicly available. This is a one-off procedure at the start of a new programme. Follow-up on this procedure is taken care of in other procedures. If the cyclical

assessment of the concerned study field is planned within two years, the programme is assessed as part of this procedure. In case no such review is planned in time, a specific procedure is applied for the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field.

The main cyclical external review process within the Latvian higher education system is the Assessment and accreditation of study fields. This process includes a self-evaluation process, a site-visit by experts and a public review report.

The review panel learned that a specific characteristic of the agency's external quality assurance frameworks is that there is no clear cut-off moment in the review process. The written report is based on the situation at the time of the review visit. Based on this report the institution may implement improvement measures, which are reported to the Study Quality Commission, which takes the work done since the review visit into account in its decision. If there are still urgent matters, the Commission may also require the institution to take remedial action in order to sustain the accreditation decision. In such case follow-up by the agency's staff is guaranteed, and if relevant, by the Study Quality Commission. This approach creates a clear incentive to implement improvements soon after a review. However, it leads to a situation where the report of the site visit does not report on the full review process (see ESG 2.6). The review panel recommends to communicate this approach explicitly to all stakeholders involved, in order to avoid misunderstanding.

The Accreditation of higher education institutions is a one-off procedure, which includes a self-evaluation process, a site-visit by experts and a public review report. In the current framework no specific follow-op procedure is in place at institutional level. The agency is preparing the implementation of cyclical institutional accreditation which may replace the other external review procedures currently in place. No details had been developed at the moment of the review, however.

In case of assessment of substantial changes, the institution provides information in a free format. Depending on the nature, a purely administrative process is implemented by the agency, or – in case of substantial changes, a site visit without a student member is organised. Usually there are no additional recommendations, but, in case there are some, they are addressed during the assessment and accreditation of study field, so the follow-up procedure is integrated in the accreditation of study fields.

The agency has developed for its main procedures general methodological guidelines, as well as guidelines for the higher education institutions and expert panels. As mentioned under ESG 2.1, the review panel considers that the differences between the guidelines for higher education institutions and for experts may lead to inconsistencies. More generally, the agency relies, correctly, on national legislation. In some cases only generic references are included to the legislation, without repetition of those legal requirements. In order to correctly and transparently inform, especially international, experts, the panel encourages the agency to integrate all information in one guidebook per assessment procedure, including all relevant criteria and information which from the Law on Higher Education and Cabinet Regulations, as well as the assessment methodologies and frameworks and the guidelines for institutions, as well as experts. Such guidebook should be available in English for each procedure which includes international experts or other EQAR-registered agencies.

The Accreditation of a study programme abroad is a voluntary procedure, which consists of a self-evaluation report, a site visit and an external report. Specific follow-up is not provided.

Panel suggestions for improvement

13. The review panel recommends to communicate its approach in which there is no clear cut-off moment for its assessments clearly to all stakeholders (the published report is based on the situation at the time of the review visit, while the Study Quality Commission takes progress made after the site visit into account in its decision-making process).

14. The review panel encourages the agency to integrate all information in guidebook per assessment procedure, including all relevant criteria and information which from the Law on Higher Education and Cabinet Regulations, as well as the assessment methodologies and frameworks and the guidelines for institutions, as well as experts. Such guidebook should be available in English for each procedure which includes international experts or other EQAR-registered agencies.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Evidence

For each assessment procedure there is a different composition of review panels. Composition of the review panels is listed in Table 7 based on the information provided in the self-assessment report. All review panels have a balance of stakeholders involved and include a student representative, except the Assessment of feasibility on changes in a study field and Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of a study field.

Table 7: Composition of review panels (LSA: Student Union of Latvia – LDDK: Latvian Employers Confederation) – table based on the self-assessment report, p.64-65

Type of assessment	Number of experts	Representatives and a number of them	Number of foreign experts
Institutional accreditation	7	LSA – 1	At least 2
Assessment and Accreditation of a study field	At least 5	LSA – 1 LDDK – 1	At least 2
Licensing of a study programme	3	LSA – 1 LDDK – 1	0
Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field	2	–	1
Assessment of feasibility on changes in study field (i.e. study programme)	1	–	0
Accreditation of foreign study programmes abroad	At least 4 for one study programme	One panel member should represent students and another one the labour market but no nominations	At least 2 have to be external to the country where the HEI is based

		from certain organisations are required	

In three of the assessment procedures (Assessment and accreditation of a study field, Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of a study field and Accreditation of a higher education institution), the agency involves international experts. 41% of the experts involved in assessment procedures between 2018 and 2022 have been from abroad.

Experts are selected from the agency's database, which includes 1,253 experts – both those who have participated in the assessment procedures in the previous system and also the ones who have been accepted recently and have not yet participated in any procedures. Every individual interested in assessment procedures can apply for inclusion in the database by registering on the E-platform and filling in the application form and providing his/her CV. After each assessment procedure, the agency's assessment coordinator prepares feedback about the performance of each expert in the group.

The procedure for selecting experts for a particular assessment procedure and the competencies that must be covered by the experts' group are defined in the Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts. The agency has developed a set of competencies that must be covered by each experts group, including the requirements for experts to have experience in internal quality assurance or in the assessment of higher education and experts are competent in the field of study programme (study field) under assessment. In addition, such aspects as the type of higher education institution, the specific features of study programmes (e.g. distance learning), level of study programmes, the assessment type (initial or cyclical assessment) are taken into consideration. All experts are selected by the agency, except those who are delegated by the Student Union of Latvia (LSA) and/or the Latvian Employers Confederation (LDDK). However, the agency can decline experts delegated by LSA and/or LDDK and ask for a new nomination if there is a certain reason and justification.

The agency approves the experts' groups and appoints the group chair and secretary. The chair is responsible for managing the work of the expert's group whereas the secretary is responsible for the joint report. Both roles can be taken by any member of the experts' group (also student or employer). Each experts group is supported by a staff member of the agency, who is not a member of the experts' group.

In order to ensure that the experts who participate in the assessment procedures are well prepared, the agency organises two types of trainings – a separate training for each experts group before the on-site assessment visit and a larger training intended for all local and international experts included in the database.

Analysis

The agency decided to assign the appointment of panel member to the agency management in order to guarantee an efficient process. The agency takes into account the balance of perspectives and involves foreign experts in Study field assessments and the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions. The panel commends the agency for its progress in the involvement of international experts. For the reviews of study programmes abroad, the agency takes care to always have at least one panel member who knows the local context and language.

For the agency's main procedures Licencing of new programmes and Assessment and accreditation of study fields, as well as for the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions, the review process is carried out by a group of experts, including a student and a representative of the Latvian Employers Confederation.

The agency argues that the procedures for Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field and Assessment of feasibility on changes in a study field, should be considered as "technical procedures". The EQAR Register Committee took a clear position on this approach for the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field procedure based on a substantial change report submitted by the agency in 2021. It considered that "*the specific nature of this quality assurance procedures could have been a valid argument to design it as an entirely desk-based, administrative procedure without involving any experts at all.*" The EQAR Register Committee concluded that in the former case experts should include a student. The agency has not resolved this issue and sustains its position that two experts should be sufficient.

The procedure for the Assessment of feasibility on changes in a study field existed already at the time of the previous review. The former review panel did not discuss the approach for this procedure, and EQAR did not flag the lack of a student-member on the panels for this kind of reviews, either. Nevertheless, the current review panel considers the approach for this procedure similar to the one for the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, and even more outspoken as only one expert is involved in this process.

The review panel has taken into account the reasoning of EQAR on this subject and equally considers that the fact that the procedure is not a stand-alone procedure in itself is not a sufficient reason not to follow the requirements of ESG 2.4 for the composition of a panel. As external experts are involved in the procedure, the agency seems to consider that an expert view is relevant in this procedure, and therefore, should also involve student representatives in these two procedures to ensure different perspectives of stakeholders as well as double check the final expert findings and the relevance of the recommendations. In the opinion of the panel the position of EQAR on the procedure for Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of a study field, is equally relevant for the Assessment of feasibility on changes in a study field procedure. So, the absence of a student-member for those two procedures cannot be considered to be ESG-compliant in relation to ESG 2.4.

The agency organises trainings for national and international experts regularly. The panel discussed the training which is provided with the review experts it has met. They are very positive on the training and support they receive in the preparation of a review. The panel encourages the agency to consider whether it is useful to design some online training sessions, which may be recorded, to provide international experts with insights in the Latvian higher education system, but also to make sure that all experts are aware of all recent developments in the European higher education area, such as specific requirements to distance learning and student-centred learning and assessment. Furthermore, the possibility to participate as an observer in a review for training purposes is valued positively by the relevant stakeholders.

Taking into account that all major review processes are compliant with the standard, while also taking into account that the expert-based review processes for the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field and the Assessment of feasibility on changes in a study fields do not include a student-member, and therefore only partially comply with this ESG standard. So, overall the review panel considers that the manner of implementation is not consistent over all of the agency's procedures.

Panel commendations

3. The panel commends the agency for its progress in the involvement of international experts.

Panel recommendations

5. The panel urges the agency to include student-members in all procedures involving external experts, in particular in the procedures for Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field and the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study field.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

15. The panel encourages the agency to consider whether it is useful to design some online training sessions.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

2018 review recommendation

The methodologies and criteria applied to the decision-making processes in the CAS and CLSP and the external Council of Higher Education could benefit from additional clarity. The panel also consider that the decision-making process applied by the joint committee could benefit by referring the report back to the expert panels where additional information or clarification could be sought in cases where contradictions of discrepancies occur.

Evidence

The decisions on quality assessment procedures performed by the agency are taken in the following way:
- Decisions on Licensing study programmes, Inclusion of licensed study programme in accreditation form of study field, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields are taken by the Study Quality Commission.
- Decisions on Institutional accreditation are taken by the Council of Higher Education. Starting from 2025 this will be under the competence of Study Quality Commission.
- Decisions on accreditation of foreign study programmes are taken by the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes.

Depending on each quality assessment procedure there are different possible outcomes:
- For the licensing of the study programme the programme can be either licensed or not.
- For the accreditation and assessment of the study fields the decision can be either refusal of accreditation or accreditation for two or six years.
- For the inclusion of licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field the possible decisions can be to include it or not and the study programme is assessed as excellent, good, average or poor.
- For the assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields the possible decisions can be to approve or not to approve the changes.
- For the accreditation of a higher education institution the possible decisions can be to accredit it or not.
- For the accreditation of foreign study programmes the possible decisions can be the refusal of accreditation or accreditation for two or six years.

In case the Study Quality Commission considers this necessary, it may include some 'tasks' for the institution in its decision, according to the agency most often related to legislative requirements (e.g. incorrect use of the format for diploma supplement). The institution is expected to provide updates

on the implementation of those tasks. If the implementation is not satisfactory, the Study Quality Commission may revise its accreditation decision.

The overarching assessment criteria are developed and set on the level of Cabinet regulations. The detailed criteria are developed by the agency and included in the assessment methodologies and subsequently in the guidelines for the self-assessment reports and experts reports and published on the website of the agency.

The agency has created templates for the self-assessment reports for Licensing, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Institutional accreditation, Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field and Accreditation of foreign study programmes to ensure consistency of the outcomes. Consistency is further ensured by training experts and by revision of each draft report by two staff members of the agency (including the assessment coordinator).

The decision-making criteria are generally described in the Law on Higher Education Institutions and Cabinet regulations and further elaborated in the assessment methodologies of the agency. The decision is made considering the following:
- the information submitted by the institution (the self-assessment report prepared by the institution and additional information requested by the experts' group and the agency, as well as additional information submitted by the higher education institution);
- the joint assessment report prepared by the expert panel, without an overall judgement by the expert panel;
- the higher education institution may delegate not more than two representatives for the participation in the Committee meeting.
- the opinion of sector experts who are invited to the Study Quality Commission meeting in case of regulated professions.

Table 8: Outcomes of the assessment procedures in 2018 – 2022 (as published in the SAR, p71-72)

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 (till 31 October)
Licensing of study programme	22	12	60	37	13*
Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)	18	25	37	19	14
Inclusion of a licensed programme	0	0	0	0	30
Accreditation and assessment of study fields	0	4	2	54**	30***
Accreditation of HEI	0	0	1	0	0

*2 decisions on rejections to license a study programme
**13 decisions on the accreditation for 2 years term and 41 decision on the accreditation for 6 years
***6 decisions on the accreditation for 2 years term and 24 decision on the accreditation for 6 years

In the period 2020 – 2021 there are 15 decisions taken on the accreditation of foreign study programmes, where 6 decisions are for accreditation of 2 years term and 9 decisions – 6 years term.

Analysis

Overall, the Cabinet Regulations and the published methodologies provide explicit and published criteria. The Study Quality Commission does not only base its decision on the experts' report, which is produced in line with the published methodologies and criteria, but also based on "the documents submitted by the higher education institution/college, the comments of the higher education

institution/college on the factual errors detected in the joint opinion by the experts group, if any, the opinion of the IKVD, the certification body, and the Ministry of Defence, if any, and other information available to the Commission, if any. If necessary, the Commission shall review the actual circumstances at the higher education institution/college and other information available to the Commission and decide on the accreditation and accreditation term of the relevant study field or the refusal to accredit the study field, providing individual evaluation of each study programme in the decision." So, the Study Quality Commission plays an active role in the assessment processes, as it does not only review experts' reports, but also takes into account additional information and hears institutions and representatives of professional associations. In general, experts are not invited to these meetings. The review panel considers that the guidelines for decisions of the Study Quality Commission may be made more explicit, especially in so far it concerns compulsory tasks which may be required as a condition to sustain a positive accreditation decision. The previous ENQA panel already pointed this out. The agency has not addressed this recommendation, yet. The review panel concurs with the previous panel and repeats the recommendation that the Study Quality Committee deliberations appear to have some undefined criteria that the agency may articulate.

The methodology for Accreditation of study fields, based on an external assessment by the agency itself is well described. However, the legislative framework also allows institutions to involve another EQAR-registered agency to perform the external assessment. In this case the institution still needs to request for accreditation to AIKA. The Cabinet Regulation No 793 sets several requirements for another EQAR-registered agency, for example the size of expert panel, the requirements for evaluation and the assessment scale. During the site visit, the agency indicated that in such case the Accreditation procedure is the same as for an assessment performed by the agency itself: the Study Quality Commission would check compliance with the legislative requirements and carry-out the decision on accreditation. The information on the agency's website (a scheme and short information on www.youtube.com regarding the steps of this procedure) is only available in Latvian. Furthermore, the Cabinet Regulation No 793 also requires that AIC "shall publish the guidelines for drafting the content of the contract" on this assessment. The panel was not informed about the existence of such guidelines for drafting the content of the contract. During the site visit several representatives of the agency mentioned that they will elaborate on this matter as soon as an institution informs the agency that it will request another EQAR-registered agency to perform the external assessment. No such request had been filed until the date of the site visit. Although AIKA should be informed at the beginning of the process, and, so, the agency has time to further develop its procedure, the panel considers it necessary to provide clear guidance on how such a process will be organised before it starts. This is necessary to allow institutions to understand the scope and the consequences of such a choice, as well as for the EQAR-registered agency which performs the review to take into account all necessary requirements which are needed to apply for accreditation based on this agency's review. Orally AIKA indicated that in such a case the Study Quality Commission will check compliance with the own assessment framework and national regulations.. The panel urges the agency to develop full and detailed information on the requirements for higher education institutions and EQAR-registered agencies which may be interested to perform assessments of study fields as a basis for AIKA-accreditation..

As assessed under ESG 2.1, the agency has not developed, nor published any criteria for decisions on the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields. Therefore, it does not dispose of a framework to apply consistently. The panel considers the absence of the framework and the non-compliance with ESG 2.1 as the root cause of this deficiency, and decided to give most weight to it under ESG 2.1.

For the Accreditation of study programmes abroad the Accreditation commission for foreign study programmes has been set-up. This Commission works in a similar way as the Study Quality Commission, but due to legislative limitations a separate commission needed to be set-up for the

accreditation of foreign study programmes. For this procedure only the agency's own guidelines are taken into account.

Although insufficient information, especially in English, if publicly available for Accreditation of study programmes based on an assessment by another EQAR-registered agency, and no published assessment framework is available for the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields, as already assessed under ESG part 2.1, the review panel has applied the required proportionality, and taken into account that all major review processes are compliant with the standard. It, therefore, considers that the agency is compliant with this standard.

Panel recommendations

6. The review panel recommends to make the guidelines for decisions of the Study Quality Commission more explicit, especially in so far it concerns compulsory tasks which may be required as a condition to sustain a positive accreditation decision.
7. The panel urges the agency to provide full and easily accessible information in English about the procedure and requirements it will apply in case of accreditation of study fields based on an external assessment by another EQAR-registered agency.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

2018 review recommendation

The panel encourages AIKA to provide more information in the final reports on the rationale or analytical side of the decision made and also to include the rich opinion on the professional regulatory context that was considered by the Committee making the final decision.

Evidence

The agency has designed standard assessment report templates for all assessment procedures except for the changes in the study fields. According to the self-assessment report, the current assessment report templates have been improved based on the received feedback from the higher education institutions and the experts. The templates generally follow the structure suggested by the ESG guidelines for this standard.

The consistency of the reports is ensured by the procedure for preparing the reports. In all procedures performed by the agency the experts report is a joint work of the whole experts' group. This is emphasised by the methodology for each assessment procedure. The consistency is further ensured by introducing two steps in submitting the reports – draft report and final report. When the experts submit their draft reports, they are reviewed by two staff members of the agency (including the assessment coordinator) to ensure consistency between the judgements and justifications and to ensure that the criteria are fully covered. When the report is accepted by the Agency, it is sent to the higher education institution for factual errors.

Since 2019, the public part of the agency's E-platform provides core information on the Latvian higher education. It allows to search by study field, programme or higher education institution and includes the terms of accreditation and licensing, as well as the reports prepared by the review panels. Information is published in two languages: Latvian and English. Both positive and negative reports are published.

Information on study programme accreditation abroad is published at the website of the agency after the decision is made, there is information on the decisions taken and the expert reports.

Reports on the accreditation procedures (study field and higher education institution) performed by the agency are transferred to the DEQAR database – manually in case of accreditation of foreign study programmes and automatically in other cases.

Analysis

For Accreditation of higher education institution, Assessment and accreditation of a study field, Licensing of study programme and Accreditation of study programmes abroad, the agency publishes full reports of the expert panels, including summary reports which are helpful for the broader public. As indicated above, the panel found out that the process of external assessment does not end with the review panels' work. Institutions may add additional information on how they have implemented suggestions by the review panel and are heard by the Study Quality Commission before a decision is made. The Study Quality Commission may also hear professional standard setting bodies and take their input into account in its decision-making process. None of this additional information is made public.

The work of the Study Quality Commission leads to a decision which is communicated in writing to the involved higher education institution. Next to the panel report, the only part of the decision letter which is made public, is the term of accreditation. As already pointed-out by the previous ENQA review panel, the elements that are considered by the Committee making the final decision on the rationale or analytical side of the decision made and the input provided on the professional regulatory context are not published. The review panel does not consider this practice to be in-line with this standard. Though this inconsistency was already flagged by the previous ENQA review panel, the agency has not acted adequately to solve this issue.

As explained above, the Study Quality Commission may attribute tasks, that must be implemented before a certain date to keep an accreditation decision valid. This information, which adds in the perspective of the panel elements to the decision, should be communicated transparently together with the report to ensure that the stakeholders are well informed.

For reviews of study programmes abroad, the agency does publish full reports, as well as the decision-making document sent to the institutions. As is the case for the agency's other processes, the decision document does not refer to any additional elements which have been taken into consideration in the decision-making process next to the expert panel's report.

While a link to the E-platform is present at the home page of AIKA, the agency does not provide a link to this platform anymore on the sub-pages of the different review procedures, nor under the tab 'For Students'. The panel encourages the agency to add links to the E-Platform on every sub-page where reports and outcomes of national review procedures are mentioned, in order to make it easier to find for the reader of the website.

The panel considers the fact that only the duration of accreditation terms is published while the full decisions, including the elements which have led to the decision, as well as potential additional 'tasks' are not published together with the reports for all procedures relating to Latvian higher education as a substantial deficiency relating to this standard. Experts reports are clear and accessible to the

academic community and are published. For the Accreditation of foreign study programmes both the decision document is published, as well as the expert's report. So, overall the panel considers the agency to partially comply with this ESG standard.

Panel recommendations

8. The agency should urgently publish accreditation decisions as they are communicated to the institution, including potential tasks and elements taken which are taken into account next to the published experts' reports.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

16. The panel encourages the agency to add links to the E-Platform on every sub-page where reports and outcomes of national review procedures are mentioned, in order to make it easier to find for the reader of the website.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

2018 review recommendation

The panel recommends that the agency AIC/AIKA considers revising those aspects of the appeals process and procedures which may potentially undermine the perception of an independent objective decision-making and describes in the respective document the impact of the appeal decision made by the Chairperson of AIC on the accreditation decision of CAS/CLSP.

Evidence

The right to submit complaints regarding the process of assessment is indicated in the assessment methodologies of the Licencing of study programmes, Inclusion of licenced programmes on the accreditation form of a study field and the Assessment and accreditation of study fields, stating that if, during the assessment process, the assessment experts or higher education institution detect any violation in the assessment process or unethical conduct of the parties involved in the assessment process, a complaint may be expressed, firstly, to the assessment coordinator, or it could be directly submitted in written to the agency. Until the moment of the review, no cases of received written complaints have been registered.

According to the Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Cabinet regulations each decision (except about Institutional accreditation, which is not a decision taken by the agency) can be appealed, by sending appeal to the Appeals Commission. The Appeals Commission reviews the justification of appeal and issues its decision, and the decision of the Appeal Commission can be disputed in the court in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Law. Due to legislative changes, which state that decision on the cyclical Institutional accreditation is transferred from the Council of Higher Education to the SQC in the future, the appeals will be under the competence of this Appeals Commission as well. There have been three cases of appeal. Two cases related to the accreditation period. In both cases, the Appeals Commission decided to keep the SQC decision in force. In one of the two cases,

this decision was contested in court in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Law. The court (first instance) has not yet considered the administrative case and has not issued a verdict. It should be noted that this is the first case when accreditation decision is contested in the court. In a third case, a higher education institution appealed the decision to refuse the right to implement two study programmes in English. Also in this case, the Appeals Commission decided to keep the decision of the SQC in force.

The Appeals Commission consists of four members, including the chair of the commission. The requirements for members of Appeals Commission are set in the Law on higher education institutions, but the criteria and selection procedure are developed by the agency. In the commission there are two experts with higher education experience and two experts with a degree in law and professional experience in administrative process law, who apply through an open call and are approved by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council.

Regarding the accreditation of foreign study programmes the contract between AIC and the higher education institution stipulates the possibilities for complaints about procedural issues (composition of the expert group, adhering to deadlines etc.) as well as the possibility to contest the final outcome. The formal outcome of the assessment procedure may be contested through an appeal to the appeals committee for foreign study programmes. It can be contested by submitting an appeal to the appeals committee for foreign study programme within one month after the decision has entered into force. This appeals committee consists of three members, approved by the chairperson of AIC based on the selection conducted by the agency. There have been no cases of appeals to the final outcome so far and the deadline for submitting an appeal has expired for all completed assessment procedures.

Analysis

The review panel discussed the possibility to appeal accreditation decisions made by the agency. It considers that the appeals procedure which has been developed, and the Appeals Committee which has been compiled in January 2022, finally brought the agency's review procedures for Latvian higher education institutions in line with this standard. It also resolved the issue of agency staff being involved in the decision making on appeals that was pointed out by the previous ENQA review. The representatives of higher education institutions the panel met during the site visit were informed sufficiently about their right to appeal. The panel considers, however, that information on this procedure, could be found easier if the agency would add a link to the relevant procedure on the page of each individual review procedure. The review panel encourages the agency to add such a link on the relevant pages of its website.

The Rules of Procedure of the Appeals Commission are approved in 2022. This Commission consists of two higher education experts and two experts with higher education in law and at least five years of professional experience in administrative procedures. The panel learned that the members of the Appeals Committee are only appointed for a term of two years at this time. The panel suggests to lengthen the appointment of the Committee's members. This will reduce workload for the agency on the one hand, and allow the members of the Committee to build some track record on how to manage appeals on the other hand.

At this moment one of the members of the Appeals Committee is a PhD student. In order to maximize the presence of the student-voice in the agency, the agency may consider to add the requirement to always have a student-member in the Appeals Committee.

Although the right of higher education institutions to submit complaints regarding the process of assessment is indicated in the assessment methodologies of the Licencing of study programmes, Inclusion of licenced programmes on the accreditation form of a study field and the Assessment and accreditation of study fields, there is no written procedure for hearing of such complaints nor for the

consequences and further steps that ensue when a complaint is found to be reasonable. Having this procedure set and published would raise the level of the transparency of external quality assurance system.

In the current procedure for (ex-ante) accreditation of higher education institutions, the decision is taken by the Council for Higher Education. Appeals are, therefore, oriented towards the Ministry. Legislative changes have already been made to transfer the decisions on institutional accreditation and after this change, the current Appeals Committee will also manage appeals of this procedure.

The national provisions are not applicable for the Accreditation of foreign study programmes. During the site visit the panel learned that due to legislative reasons, a separate appeals procedure and Appeals Committee is necessary for procedures for foreign study programmes. Although the agency refers to such a procedure and Committee in its contracts with foreign higher education institutions, it has not taken any initiative to set-up such an Appeals Committee, nor has is designed a procedure for setting-up such a Committee. Nor has the agency designed or published any procedure to cope with potential complaints, which may be submitted according to the contract between the agency and the higher education institution. Therefore, the agency does not comply with this standard for the Accreditation of foreign study programmes. The panel considers that the agency should urgently develop an appeals and complaints procedure for its accreditation procedure for foreign degrees. Even if such reviews are not performed at this moment, an appeals procedure is required as long as this procedure formally exists.

Although the approach to appeals and complaints for the accreditation of study programmes is non-compliant with this ESG standard, the review panel has applied the required proportionality, and taken into account that all major review processes are compliant with the standard. It, therefore, considers that the agency is partially compliant with this standard. The overall interpretation of the ESG standard is correct, but the manner of implementation is not consistent over all of the agency's procedures.

Panel recommendations

9.   The panel recommends to publish the procedure to follow-up complaints concerning Latvian activities of the agency.
10. The panel urges the agency to develop an appeals and complaints procedure for its accreditation procedure for foreign degrees.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

17. The panel suggests to add a link to the appeals procedure on the page about decision making per procedure, in order to better inform institutions about their right to appeal.
18. The panel suggests to appoint members of the Appeals Committee for a longer period than the current two years' period.
19. The agency may consider to add the requirement to always have a student member in the Appeals Committee.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

1. The panel commends the agency for the high level of trust it has gained among all Latvian stakeholders. (ESG 3.1)
2. The panel commends the agency for its efforts to increase efficiency in its work through the development of an E-platform. (ESG 3.5)
3. The panel commends the agency for its progress in the involvement of international experts. (ESG 2.4)

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While, as indicated under the separate ESG standards, some elements of the agency's processes and procedures do not comply with specific standards, the review panel considers that those weaknesses are not of such importance that they lead to overall non-compliance. Therefore, in light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, AIKA is overall in compliance with the ESG.

Nevertheless, the panel has formulated several recommendations and suggestions for further improvement.

1. The panel recommends the agency to continue to pursue further increases in its independence from state institutions to define quality assurance procedures and assessment frameworks. (ESG 3.3)
2. The panel recommends to regularly publish thematic analysis reports in line with the first reports which were in preparation at the moment of the ENQA review. (ESG 3.4)
3. The panel urges the agency to define an assessment framework in order to ensure that the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields considers all relevant standards of ESG Part 1 in order to guarantee that the study field stays ESG-compliant upon implementation of the proposed changes. (ESG 2.1)
4. The panel recommends to mention the requirement of a public quality assurance policy (ESG 1.1) explicitly in the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field and the Accreditation of foreign study programmes frameworks, the national qualification framework (ESG 1.2) in each assessment framework, focus more on assessment policies in all assessment frameworks, including a focus on student-centred assessment (ESG 1.3), and to add reference to public information (ESG 1.8) in the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field framework. (ESG 2.1)
5. The panel urges the agency to include student-members in all procedures involving external experts, in particular in the procedures for Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field and the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study field. (ESG 2.4)
6. The review panel recommends to make the guidelines for decisions of the Study Quality Commission more explicit, especially in so far it concerns compulsory tasks which may be required as a condition to sustain a positive accreditation decision. (ESG 2.5)
7. The panel urges the agency to provide full and easily accessible information in English about the procedure and requirements it will apply in case of accreditation of study fields based on an external assessment by another EQAR-registered agency. (ESG 2.5)
8. The agency should urgently publish accreditation decisions as they are communicated to the institution, including potential tasks and elements taken which are taken into account next to the published experts' reports. (ESG 2.6)
9. The panel recommends to publish the procedure to follow-up complaints concerning Latvian activities of the agency. (ESG 2.7)

10. The panel urges the agency to develop an appeals and complaints procedure for its accreditation procedure for foreign degrees. (ESG 2.7)

Suggestions for further improvement

1. The panel encourages the agency to benefit optimally from the broad recognition of its expertise by all national stakeholders to play a proactive role in designing the future of internal and external quality assurance in Latvian higher education. (ESG 3.1)
2. The panel encourages the agency to analyse whether greater consistency may be achieved in the reporting on its strategic planning, which is currently reported in the public annual report and the annual report to the Ministry of Education and Science separately, while reducing the workload for the agency. (ESG 3.1)
3. The panel recommends to publish the agency's annual reports on its website as soon as they are available. (ESG 3.1)
4. The panel encourages the agency to further search for options to reduce the number of decisions which need to be signed off by the AIC chair to the strict legal minimum. (ESG 3.3)
5. The review panel encourages the agency to reflect on the existing set of external quality assurance procedures and to assess whether further efficiency gains are possible. (ESG 3.5)
6. The panel encourages the agency to create a user feedback panel in order to decide on priorities for further development of the E-platform. (ESG 3.5)
7. The panel encourages the agency to reflect timely on the impact on the expected workload of a transition to institutional accreditation, both for the agency and for higher education institutions. (ESG 3.5)
8. The review panel urges the agency to submit a substantive change report to EQAR as soon as new external quality assurance frameworks have been adopted. (ESG 3.7)
9. The review panel urges the agency to implement recommendations systematically. (ESG 3.7)
10. The panel suggests to align the template for the self-assessment reports with the template for the experts' reports Accreditation of higher education institutions, Licensing of study programmes, Assessment and accreditation of study fields and Inclusion of a licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, using the same subdivision and numbering. The panel suggests to consider to integrate the student self-governance more explicitly in the agency's cyclical procedures (ESG 1.1). (ESG 2.1)
11. The panel encourages the agency to develop a clear vision on the future of external quality assurance in higher education in Latvia, including the relation between teaching and research reviews, and to develop a workplan together with institutions and the Ministry which defines the steps which need to be taken in order to grow the necessary trust to be able to implement cyclical institutional accreditation. (ESG 2.2)
12. The panel encourages the agency to discuss with higher education institutions and the Ministry to further make the agency's current review processes more fit for purpose. (ESG 2.2)
13. The review panel recommends to communicate its approach in which there is no clear cut-off moment for its assessments clearly to all stakeholders (the published report is based on the situation at the time of the review visit, while the Study Quality Commission takes progress made after the site visit into account in its decision making process). (ESG 2.3)
14. The review panel encourages the agency to integrate all information in guidebook per assessment procedure, including all relevant criteria and information which from the Law on Higher Education and Cabinet Regulations, as well as the assessment methodologies and frameworks and the guidelines for institutions, as well as experts. Such guidebook should be available in English for each procedure which includes international experts or other EQAR-registered agencies.

15. The panel encourages the agency to consider whether it is useful to design some online training sessions. (ESG 2.4)
16. The panel encourages the agency to add links to the E-Platform on every sub-page where reports and outcomes of national review procedures are mentioned, in order to make it easier to find for the reader of the website. (ESG 2.6)
17. The panel suggests to add a link to the appeals procedure on the page about decision making per procedure, in order to better inform institutions about their right to appeal. (ESG 2.7)
18. The panel suggests to appoint members of the Appeals Committee for a longer period than the current two years' period. (ESG 2.7)
19. The agency may consider to add the requirement to always have a student member in the Appeals Committee. (ESG 2.7)

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

SESSION NO.	TIMING	TOPIC	PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW
03.02.2023 - Online meeting with the agency's resource person		
1	9:00-11:00 CET 120 min	Review panel's kick-off meeting and preparations for site visit	
2	11:00-12:30 CET 90 min	An online clarifications meeting with the agency's resource person regarding the specific national/legal context in which an agency operates, specific quality assurance system to which it belongs and key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities	Head of the Agency Head of the Quality Assessment Unit
	21.02.2023 – Day 0 (pre-visit) – hotel		
3	17:00-17:30 30 min	Informal meet-up with agency resource person – last discussion on practical issues	Expert – assessment coordinator Head of the Agency
4	17:30-19:00 60 min	Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day 1	
	19:00	Dinner (panel only)	
	22.02.2023 – Day 1		
	9:00-9:30 30 min	Review panel's private meeting	
5	9:30-10:30 60 min	Meeting with the CEO and the Chair of the Board	Chairperson of the AIC Board Head of the Agency
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	

6	10:45-12:00 75 min	Meeting with the Senior Management team and team responsible for preparation of the self-assessment report	Head of the Agency Head of the Quality Assessment Unit Expert – assessment coordinator
	75 min	Lunch (panel only)	
7	13:15-14:00 45 min	Meeting with representatives of Higher Education Quality Assurance Council and social partners.	Chair of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council, Latvian Employers' Confederation (LDDK) State Secretary, Ministry of Education and Science Chair of the Rectors` Council Secretary General of the Rectors` Council President of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LTRK) Head of the Sectoral Human resources Developing Division, Ministry of Health Senior Expert, Sectoral Human resources Developing Division, Ministry of Health
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
8	14:15-15:00	Meeting with representatives of Study Quality Commission	Chair of the Commission Members of the Commission Student-member of the Commission
	30 min	Review panel's private discussion	
9	15:30-16:15 45 min	Meeting with Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes	Chair of the Commission Deputy Chair of Commission
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
10	16:30-17:00 30 min	Demo of E-Platform	E-system administrator Head of the Agency
11	17:00-17:30 30 min	Meeting with members of the Appeals Commission	Chair of the Appeals Commission Member of the Appeals Commission
	17:30-18:30 60 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members and preparations for day 2	
	19:00	Dinner (panel only)	
		23.02.2023 – Day 2	

12	9:00-9:45 45 min	Meeting with ministry representatives	Deputy Director in Higher Education sector, Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation Director, Department of Structural Funds Deputy State Secretary – Director of the Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Ministry of Education and Science
	15 min	Walk/taxi back to the agency	
	10:00-10:30 30 min	Review panel's private meeting	
13	10:30-11:30 60 min	Meeting with student representatives involved in policy making of the agency and student representatives on review panels	President of Student Union of Latvia Student-member of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council Member Student Union of Latvia Students – assessment expert
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
14	11:45-12:45 60 min	Meeting with key staff of the agency/staff in charge of external QA activities	Assessment coordinators Lawyer Office Manager (secretary)
	75 min	Lunch (panel only)	
	14:00-14:45 45 min	Meeting with heads of some reviewed HEIs/ HEI representatives	Director, Malnava College (online) Rector, Rezekne Academy of Technologies (online) Rector, BA School of Business and Finance Acting Rector, Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs, RISEBA University of Business, Arts and Technology Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs, Riga Technical University
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	
16	15:00-16:00 60 min	Meeting with quality assurance officers of HEIs	Programme Development Project Manager, Study Process Quality Analysis Unit, Riga Stradins University Director of the Academic Department, University of Latvia (online) Quality Manager of the Study Quality Assessment Centre, Daugavpils University (online) Deputy Director, College of Business Administration Vice-rector of Science and Academic Affairs, Turiba Business University Translator present
	15 min	Review panel's private discussion	

17	16:15-17:15 (15:15 – 16:15 CET) 60 min	Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool (all review processes)	Panel chairs and members (online)
	17:15-17:45 30 min	Wrap-up meeting among panel members: preparation for day 3 and provisional conclusions	
	19:00	Dinner (panel only)	
24.02.2023 – Day 3
18	9:00-10:00 60 min	Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify	
19	10:00-11:00 60 min	Meeting with CEO to clarify any pending issues	Head of the Agency
20	11:00-12:30 90 min	Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings	
	12:30-13:00 60 min	Lunch (panel only)	
21	13:00-13:30 30 min	Final de-briefing meeting with staff and Board members of the agency to inform about preliminary findings	Chairperson of the AIC Board Head of the Agency Head of the Quality Assessment Unit

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

1. Background and context

On 3 November 2014 the Latvian government decided to assign the task to establish the new quality assurance agency in Latvia to Academic Information Centre, which is a non-profit organisation operating since 1994. Thus, in March 2015 the Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA) was established as an autonomous department of AIC, with the mandate to ensure quality assurance functions. AIKA started to work at a full capacity in July 2015.

Other structural units of AIC do not perform external quality assurance, their activities do not fall within the scope of the ESG and are not subject to this review.

AIKA is recognized as the national quality assurance agency for higher education in Latvia and was set up to improve the external quality assurance system for Latvian higher education, operating in accordance with the ESG and promoting the quality, visibility and international recognition of the Latvian higher education.

Currently there are three main quality assurance processes performed in Latvia - accreditation of higher education institutions (HEI), accreditation of study fields and licensing of study programmes.

In addition, there are two technical procedures, which were not designed as stand-alone procedures fully covering the ESG Part 2. They only cover the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation of study field.

In order to promote services of AIKA abroad, the accreditation of study programmes abroad was introduced.

Academic Information Centre (AIC) has been a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2018 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

AIC (agency) has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2018 and is applying for the renewal of EQAR registration.

2. Purpose and scope of the review

This review will evaluate the extent to which AIC (agency) complies with each of the standards of Parts 2 and 3 of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) and support the agency in its efforts to continually review and enhance its work. Such an external review is a requirement for agencies wishing to apply for ENQA membership and for EQAR registration.

2.1 Activities of the agency within the scope of the ESG

To apply for ENQA membership and EQAR registration, this review will analyse all of the agency's activities that fall within the scope of the ESG, e.g., reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditations of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant

links to research and innovation). All activities are reviewed irrespective of geographic scope (within or outside the EHEA) or whether they are obligatory or voluntary in nature.

The following activities[4] of the agency must be addressed in the external review:
1. Accreditation of higher education institution
2. Assessment and accreditation of a study field[5]
3. Licensing of study programme
4. Accreditation of study programmes abroad
5. Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)[6]
6. Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field[6]

Considering the renewal of AIC's application to EQAR, the self-evaluation report and the external review report are expected to give specific attention to the issues where the Register Committee concluded in its last decisions that the agency complied only partially with the ESG, namely ESG 2.4 and ESG 2.7.

Should anything change between now and the review, including introduction or change of the activities within and outside of the scope of the ESG, the agency should inform EQAR at the earliest convenience.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted following the methodology of ENQA Agency Reviews. The process is designed in line with the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The review procedure consists of the following steps:
- Formulation of, and agreement on the Terms of Reference for the review between AIC, ENQA and EQAR (including publishing of the Terms of Reference on ENQA's website[7]);
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Notification of EQAR about the appointed panel;
- Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit of the agency by the review panel;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Publication of the final review report;
- A decision from the EQAR Register Committee on the agency's registration on EQAR;
- A decision from the ENQA Board on ENQA membership;
- Follow-up on the panel's recommendations to the agency, including a voluntary progress visit.

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[4] All quality assurance activities are listed on EQAR website. No substantial changes to the procedures have taken place, only the titles in English have been clarified.

[5] Assessment refers to the process in which the evaluation and the drafting of the report are done either by AIC or another EQAR registered agency. Accreditation refers to the process of decision making performed by AIC.
[6] This activity was not designed as a stand-alone procedure and therefore does not independently cover all requirements of the ESG Part 2. It only covers the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation of study field.
[7] The agency is encouraged to publish the ToR on its website as well.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review panel

The review panel consists of four members: one or two quality assurance experts (at least one of which is currently employed by an ENQA member agency), an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member, and potentially a labour market representative (if requested). One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and another member as a review secretary. For ENQA Agency Reviews at least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. An additional panel member may be included in the panel at the request of the agency. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

Current members of the ENQA Board are not eligible to serve as reviewers.

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

3.2 Self-assessment by the agency, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

The agency is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and must adhere to the following guidance:

- Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;
- The self-assessment report is expected to contain:
  - a brief description of the HE and QA system;
  - the history, profile, and activities of the agency;
  - a presentation of how the agency addresses each individual standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG for each of the agency's external QA activities, with a brief, critical reflection on the presented facts;
  - opinions of stakeholders;
  - the instances of partial compliance noted in the most recent EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal and any other aspects that may have been raised by the EQAR Register Committee in subsequent change report decisions (if relevant);
  - reference to the recommendations provided in the previous review and actions taken to meet those recommendations;
  - a SWOT analysis;
  - reflections on the agency's key challenges and areas for future development.
- All the agency's external QA activities (as defined under section 2.1) are described and their compliance with the ESG is analysed in the SAR.
- The report is well-structured, concise, and comprehensive. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which the agency performs its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.3 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule which must be submitted to the agency at least six weeks before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule is to include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is usually 2,5 days. The approved schedule must be given to the agency at least one month before the site visit to properly organise the requested interviews.

In advance of the site visit (ideally at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:
- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

The review panel will be assisted by the ENQA Review Coordinator during the site visit. The review coordinator will act as the panel's chief liaison with the agency, monitor the integrity of the review process and its consistency, and ensure that ENQA's overall expectations of the review are considered and met.

The site visit will close with a final debriefing meeting in which the panel outlines its general impressions and provides an overview of the judgement on the agency's ESG compliance. The panel will not comment on whether or not the agency would be granted/reconfirmed membership with ENQA or registration on EQAR.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final review report

Based on the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will follow the purpose and scope of the review as defined under sections 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for the panel's findings concerning each standard of Parts 2 and 3 of the ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind *EQAR's Policy on Use and Interpretation of the ESG for the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies*[8] to ensure that the report contains sufficient information for the Register Committee to consider the agency's application for registration on EQAR.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language, and it will then be submitted to the agency – usually within 10 weeks of the site visit – for comment on factual accuracy and grave misunderstandings only. The agency will be given two weeks to do this and should not submit any additional material or documentation at this

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[8] Available at: https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#use-and-interpretation-of-the-esg

stage. Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the agency's feedback on possible factual errors and finalise and submit the review report to ENQA.

The report should be finalised within three months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 40-50 pages in length.

3.5. Publication of the report and a follow-up process

The agency will receive the review panel's report and publish it on its website once the Agency Review Committee has validated the report. The report will also be published on the ENQA website together with the statement of the Agency Review Committee validating external review reports by assessing the integrity of the review process and checking the quality and consistency of the reports. Importantly, during this process, and prior to final validation of the report, the Agency Review Committee has the option to request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome.

As part of the review's follow-up activities, the agency commits to react on the review recommendations and submit a follow-up report to ENQA within two years of the validation of the final external review report. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website.

The follow-up report may be complemented by an optional progress visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). The visit, which normally takes place 2-3 years after the verification of the final external review report (and after submission of the follow-up report), aims to offer an enhancement-oriented and strategically driven dialogue that ordinarily might be difficult to truly integrate in the compliance-focused site visit. The progress visit thus does not have the objective of checking the agency's ESG compliance or how the agency has followed up on the recommendations, but rather provides an arena for strategic conversations that allow the agency to reflect on its key challenges, opportunities, and priorities. Should the agency not wish to take advantage of this opportunity, it may opt out by informing the ENQA Review Coordinator about this.

4. Use of the report

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA.

The report is used as a basis for the Register Committee's decision on the agency's registration on EQAR. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The review process is thus designed to serve two purposes. In any case, the review report should only be considered final after validation by the Agency Review Committee. After submission to ENQA but before validation by the ARC, the report may not be used or relied upon by the agency, the panel, or any third party and may not be disclosed without ENQA's prior written consent. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on EQAR registration or ENQA membership.

For the purposes of EQAR registration, the agency will submit the review report (once validated by the Agency Review Committee) to EQAR via email before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency should also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), a Declaration of Honour, and any other documents that may be relevant for the application (i.e., annexes, statement to the review report, updates). EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting as stipulated in the indicative review schedule below and before the decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

5. Indicative schedule of the review

Agreement on Terms of Reference	August 2022
Appointment of review panel members	September 2022
Self-assessment completed	25 November 2022
Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator	November/December 2022
Preparation of the site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January 2023
Briefing of review panel members	January 2023
Review panel site visit	February 2023
Draft of review report and its submission to ENQA Review Coordinator for verification of its compliance with the Guidelines	April 2023
Draft of review report to be sent for a factual check to the agency	April 2023
Agency statement on the draft report to the review panel (if necessary)	May 2023
Submission of the final report to ENQA	May 2023
Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee	June 2023
Publication of report	June/July 2023
EQAR Register Committee meeting and initial consideration	Autumn 2023
Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board	Autumn 2023/February 2024

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

AIC	Academic Information Centre
AIKA	Quality Agency for Higher Education (Agency)
CHE	Council of Higher Education
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
ESF	European Social Fund
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
HEQEC	Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre
LDDK	Latvian Employers Confederation
LIZDA	Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees
LSA	Student Union of Latvia
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia
QA	quality assurance
SAR	self-assessment report
SQC	Study Quality Commission

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY AIC

Documents provided in Latvian (LV) and/of English (ENG)

- Law on Institutions of Higher Education - LV, ENG (translation in English is outdated as last translated amendments are dated by June 2021)
- Education law - LV, ENG (translation in English is outdated as last translated amendments are dated by April 2021)
- Vocational Education Law - LV, ENG (translation in English is outdated as last translated amendments are dated by June 2017)
- Law on Scientific Activities - LV, ENG (translation in English is outdated as last translated amendments are dated by November 2020)
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 11 December 2018 No. 793 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields" - LV, ENG
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 11 December 2018 No. 794 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Colleges - LV, ENG
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 11 December 2018: No. 795 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes" - LV, ENG
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 430 "Price list of paid services of the "Academic Information Centre" – LV
- The guidelines for the preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Study Fields - LV, ENG
- The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for study fields - LV, ENG
- The guidelines for the preparation of an application for study programme licensing and description of study programme - LV, ENG
- The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the experts for study programme licensing - LV, ENG
- The guidelines for the preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Institutions of Higher Education/ Colleges - LV, ENG
- The guidelines for the preparation of the Joint report of the group of experts for Institutions of Higher Education/ Colleges - LV, ENG
- The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Opinion by the Experts for inclusion of a Licensed Study Programme on the Accreditation Form - LV, ENG
- The Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes (was in force till 20/12/2017) - LV, ENG
- The Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes (in force from 20/12/2017) - LV
- The Methodology for Assessing Institutions of Higher Education/ Colleges - LV, ENG
- The Methodology for Assessing Study Directions (was in force till 20/12/2017) - LV, ENG
- The Methodology for Assessing Study Directions (in force from 20/12/2017) - LV
- Rules of Procedure of the Study Accreditation Committee - LV, ENG
- Rules of Procedure of the Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes - LV, ENG
- Rules of Procedure of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council - LV, ENG
- Annual reports on the activity of the Agency 2017 – ENG
- Annual reports on the activity of the Agency 2018 - ENG
- Follow-up Procedure - LV
- Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts - LV
- Appeals Procedure - LV
- Guidelines for selection of the Committee for the Accreditation of Studies and Committee for Licensing Study Programmes - LV
- Recommendations for creating descriptions of study courses - LV

- Thematic analysis of expert evaluations within the framework of the accreditation of study areas 2016-2017
- Article - Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level - ENG
- Article - Synergies between higher education monitoring and quality assurance national perspective - ENG
- Analytical report. "Assessments during COVID-19. Stakeholder perspective' Organizing - LV
- Analytical report. Higher education system in Latvia - LV
- Analytical report "Student-centered education approach in universities/ colleges in Latvia" - LV
- Analytical report – expert survey on the importance of pilot accreditation - LV

OTHER SOURCES PROVIDED BY THE AGENCY UPON REQUEST BY THE PANEL

- Strategic plan 2017-2022 - LV
- Annual action plan 2022 – LV
- Annual reports – LV
- 2021 report produced on request of the MoES Agency – LV and ENG
- Thematic analysis reports for study fields (in editing phase):
  - Psychology – LV and ENG
  - Law - LV
  - Information and Communication Sciences – LV
- Some examples of reports of the assessment of Changes to Accredited Study Field:
  - RTU (admission requirements, duration and scope) - LV
  - RTA (change of study field, study programme classification code, awarded degree and admission requirements) - LV
  - RISEBA (language of implementation - English was added) – LV
- The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Opinion by the Experts for inclusion of a Licensed Study Programme on the Accreditation Form - ENG
- The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Report of Inclusion of a Licensed Study Programme on the Accreditation Form - ENG
- Methodology for the Inclusion of a Licensed Study Programme on the Accreditation Form of a Study Field - ENG
- 3 examples of records of the identification and management of specific conflicts of interest (description in ENG, supporting documents in LV).
- Information on amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions, which stipulates that starting from 2025, the decision on institutional accreditation will be made by the Study Quality Commission. LV, ENG
- A list of national experts participating in the accreditation processes for study programmes abroad. ENG

ENQA AGENCY
REVIEW 2023

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review of the Academic Information Centre (AIC), undertaken in 2023.