

Synergies between higher education monitoring and quality assurance: national perspective

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Abstract: The article looks at the monitoring concept in higher education. The author analyses national higher education approaches to monitoring in different European countries and describes the role of the national quality assurance agencies in it with detailed case studies of three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Specifically, it explores the different systems for data collection and monitoring, and their impact on quality assurance procedures. The author provides policy recommendations on how to collect and use available data effectively. The study gives an insight in how to create a national framework for informed decision-making in higher education with the help of quality assurance agency and without affecting its autonomy. The article is based on research and analyses performed for establishing the national higher education quality monitoring system in Latvia.

1. Introduction

Since 1999, when the Bologna Declaration was signed, the three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – have taken various steps in implementing the Bologna principles in order to become recognised and attractive members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

For many of the countries that had regained independence or faced radical changes in the political and governance system in 1990s (including Latvia) another milestone was becoming a member of the European Union. This provided access to massive project funding opportunities in the form of the European Social Fund operational programmes.

Curaj describes such situation in analysis about the changes to Romanian higher education (Curaj et al. 2015) and this is similar to the Latvian context. Many of the projects implemented right after 2004 provided evidence based policy options and created an environment for the debate with stakeholders, international experts, and

decision makers and also offered different perspectives on the future of the Latvian higher education.

With the changes that came with further integration into the EHEA one of the most challenging issues has been the strategic management of higher education systems as a whole and evidence-based decision-making.

One of the problems with implementing strategic management is the lack of valid, standardised, and comprehensive data that would enable policy makers and stakeholders to obtain multidimensional and comparative information based on the different aspects of higher education and this applies to numerous national contexts. For example, in Romania there are several reporting and data collection exercises that only produce the same type of data presented in different formats. Another common feature in national contexts with historically strong reporting traditions is that data are collected but not necessarily analysed and in certain cases they remain irrelevant to decision-making (Ciolan et al. 2015). An important role in data collection and analysis in the national context is played by higher education quality assurance agencies (QAAs) that collect information from higher education institutions (HEIs) and publish the results and reports of assessment and accreditation procedures.

In Latvia the higher education monitoring system is currently being defined. The challenge is to make it relevant for evidence-based policy making and to define the role of the QAA within the system.

The existence of a single or integrated on-line information system on higher education should increase both transparency and data reliability as well as reduce the strain on HEIs and other information providers. The system should be publicly available and support data analysis. The data collected and used by the QAA should be integrated into the system and support the common goals of the system.

Nevertheless, collecting quantitative information on the higher education system should not be a goal in itself. Sadlak (2003) points out that for valid use of indicators, it is necessary to know what is intended to be measured by an indicator, and there is always a risk that the indicators may neither reflect the processes nor the operations that they attempt to describe.

The article analyses the concept of monitoring in higher education (in Section 3), the different national systems for monitoring higher education and the role of QAAs in these systems (in Section 4) with the example of three Baltic countries (in Section 5).

2. Methodology

The article analyses the concept of monitoring in higher education by focusing on three research questions:

- 1) Are there national monitoring systems for higher education in the European countries?
- 2) What is the role of the QAAs in monitoring the quality of higher education?
- 3) What is and what could be the synergy between the national monitoring systems and the QAAs?

In order to analyse the national concept of higher education monitoring and the role of QAAs, the author performed two surveys. The first and main survey aimed to identify what higher education monitoring means in the national context and how it is practically implemented (including the role of the national QAA). The aim of the

additional set of interviews was to explore how QAAs understand quality monitoring and what their tasks and responsibilities are in relation to quality monitoring.

The results of these surveys were considered as an additional source to complement and support the information available on the homepages of the QAAs, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and also the issues discussed within the community of QAAs.

In the both cases the respondents were representatives of QAAs or individuals who have been extensively involved in quality assurance activities in the national context (also on the policy level).

Both surveys were distributed electronically to the representatives of the following countries – Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Romania, and Slovenia. If necessary, additional clarifications were requested to respondents either in writing or in person.

Additionally, information about the general concept of higher education monitoring in Armenia, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland was analysed.

The countries for both exercises were selected in order to achieve a good balance of geographical and regional factors and to cover different external quality assurance systems.

The information received was used for formulating general conclusions but it was decided to focus on and extensively describe the cases of the three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

3. The concept of quality monitoring in higher education – theoretical considerations and interpretations

Quality in higher education is a challenging concept and there exists no unified definition that would cover all the aspects. For the purpose of this article the author will use the conceptualisations of quality by Schindler et al. – quality as purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable (Schindler et al. 2015). According to Schindler et al. (2015) each of these quality concepts can be characterised by quality indicators that could be in turn used to assess the notion of quality itself.

Monitoring is defined as a specific process of keeping quality activities under review. It can also be defined as a generic term covering all forms of internal and external quality assurance and improvement processes. It highlights the differences between external quality monitoring and internal quality monitoring (Harvey, 2004; Harvey and Knight, 1996).

When defining indicators for monitoring higher education (and quality in higher education), several issues should be taken into account – indicators should measure the phenomenon to which they refer, be easy to understand, be relevant, be strategic, and be quantitative. Furthermore, the data underlying the indicator scores should be reliable and indicators should produce information that is up-to-date with the procedures for collecting data and calculating indicators must be feasible and used in isolation (Yonezawa and Kaiser, 2003). Performance indicators and strategic indicators should also be distinguished from one another with performance indicators being a measure of HEIs activity (Cave et al. 1997) whereas the strategic indicators focusing more on the core goals established for the system.

For discussing quality monitoring in the framework of this research three viewpoints should be considered – those of the HEIs, QAAs, and the government sector (the Ministry of Education and Science or an equivalent).

Higher education institutions

The main source that sets general principles for internal and external quality assurance in the EHEA are the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) which were drafted by the major European level stakeholders in higher education and first adopted in 2005 by the EHEA ministers of education.

ESG defines monitoring as a tool for HEIs to ensure that the study programmes achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society (ESG, 2015). ESG also suggests that all the information collected by HEIs should be analysed and used for development. External quality assurance, on the other hand, should ensure that such mechanisms are in place and fully implemented. There should be also external criteria to assess whether the HEIs monitor their educational offer and address the needs of the wider society.

Quality assurance agencies

When surveying the QAAs, monitoring from their viewpoint was mostly understood in three ways – monitoring of the results of quality assurance procedures that they perform, preparing overview reports (thematic analysis, system-wide analysis) about the general findings and trends (ensuring compliance with the ESG) as well as introducing follow-up procedures (addressing the implementation of recommendations of external experts).

Governments

From the point of view of the government, higher education monitoring should serve as a tool for defining and justifying policy actions. In order to do so there should be clarity on the objectives and purpose of monitoring – is it for the quality of education or is it for the implementation of a strategy and policy? If the aim is to monitor the quality of education there should be clarity on several issues – what are the indicators used in monitoring, whether and how do they differ from the ones used by QAAs and, most importantly, what is the national concept of quality in higher education? In countries where education receives a share of public funding there is an increasing trend to scrutinise and justify public expenditure. In the Lithuanian context, the Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA) that monitors higher education and provides recommendations to the government, speaks about accountability and the assessment of performance outcomes, measuring effectiveness and efficiency, and calculating returns on higher education (MOSTA, 2015).

4. Setting the scene: correlation between higher education monitoring and quality assurance

One of the tasks of QAAs is to provide reliable and transparent information on the quality of higher education in their specific contexts. The two most common purposes

of quality assurance are accountability and enhancement and most QAAs try to accommodate them both.

The ESG serves as the reference tool for the activities of QAAs in the EHEA. The ESG state that QAAs should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations should be free from third party influence (ESG, 2015). Organisational and operational independence from third parties such as HEIs, governments and other stakeholder institutions is emphasised.

In 2012 ENQA performed an analysis of quality assurance procedures in the EHEA and found out that the external quality assurance procedures are mostly focused on the level of study programmes but there is an increasing trend in moving towards institutional evaluations (Grifoll et al. 2012). The comparative assessment of external quality assurance systems by Wächter et al. revealed that the quality criteria applied in programme and institutional assessments are similar – with more content-related indicators in programme assessments and a systemic approach and focus on internal quality management structures in institutional assessments (Wächter et al. 2015). In the majority of the European countries there is a single (national) QAA (Wächter et al., 2015). In many of those countries the national QAA was established as a step in implementing the Bologna process (EACEA, 2012).

The added value of having a single national QAA is the national knowledge base on higher education that is kept in one organisation and thus increases the credibility when analysing data, drawing conclusions and prognoses on higher education. According to Bischof et al. even in the cases when assessments are performed by foreign agencies, the decision making lies on the national agency. This is particularly characteristic for countries where the assessment outcome can result in changes in funding or the existence of HEI (Bischof et al. 2014; Wächter et al., 2015). According to the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2012 in 15 out of 27 Bologna countries the outcome of quality assessments has had an impact on funding (EACEA, 2012).

The challenge of the QAAs is to demonstrate what the impact of their quality assurance procedures is. While there is a European-level agreement on the standards and guidelines for quality assurance there is no single set of indicators for measuring quality and the choice of indicators/issues to be assessed and monitored. To a large extent, this is a political decision and the indicators are sensitive to the structure of the national higher education system. This means that the authority of QAAs depends on the national context and as such could be either empowered or weakened. This authority could also be maintained by supporting the indicators used and providing reliable sources for data on higher education.

The results of the surveys for the representatives of the QAAs illustrate the general tendencies.

When asked about the use of the term – higher education monitoring – most of the representatives of the QAAs replied that the concept is either not used or used rather generally. For example, in Norway the term “compiling data and statistics” is used more frequently.

In all the surveyed countries, there is a national system for collecting data on higher education and the HEIs are responsible for reporting their data (in several cases even obliged to by the law).

In most of the surveyed countries the higher education monitoring system is public. It can be fully public, public to some extent (e.g. in Poland) or available to the registered users only. In countries where the system is fully public, it is available in the form of an interactive portal with the possibility to compare data by choosing specific indicators. There are also public annual reports but in most cases in the national language only.

The function of the general monitoring and the responsibility for maintaining the monitoring system in most cases lies on the Ministry of Education itself or on a separate institution that has been appointed/established by the ministry (several institutions in Lithuania or the Centre for Research Data in Norway). However, there are also cases of other institutions being in charge (State Statistical Office in Armenia). The data are collected on various levels – at the level of individuals (e.g. students, academic staff) or at the level of the assessment unit (e.g. study programme, HEI) at also at the level of structural unit (e.g. faculty, department).

The collected data are diverse. There can be data on applicants to degree programmes, data on students (e.g. age, gender, marital status, nationality, student numbers, exams), data on participants and data on graduates of lifelong learning (e.g. personal identification numbers, nationality, permanent residence status, the previous education attainment of applicants to particular degree programme). There can also be data on the staff in HEIs and their remuneration (categorised by job classification, gender, nationality and budget structure by particular part of the HEI), data on internationalisation (exchange students, students with foreign citizenship), annual reports and audit reports, financing (accounting, budgets).

From the surveyed countries, only the Lithuanian and Norwegian national QAAs are asked to submit data – on the accreditation of study programmes and HEIs or on any changes in the provision (title changes or additional campuses).

The replies were various when asked whether the data collected on the national data monitoring system are to some extent related to the higher education quality indicators from the perspective of the QAA. In the case of the Czech Republic the only set of data that could be related to quality indicators is on employability of graduates. However, the monitoring report from the national system is not used by the QAA as such. In the case of Estonia, the data are used, for example, in determining the trends of international students during the institutional accreditation. In Finland, when performing audits of the quality systems of HEIs, the institutions are asked to provide key statistical data. Currently they are asked to provide the number of students and staff at the institutional level and for every degree programme – the total student intake, the number of degrees completed, the average time for degree completion, statistics on international degree students and exchange students (exchange periods of more than three months). In Norway the data collected on the national system are to a large extent related to the indicators used in quality assurance. The Norwegian QAA looks at the data on the academic environment, for instance whether the number and composition of the academic staff is sufficient, the number of students per academic staff, completion rates, drop-out rates, and research results. However, the representatives also note that they are careful with taking all these data at face-value,

as some are less reliable than others. In Poland, when initiating the assessment of a programme, the QAA asks the ministry for a report on the HEI (number of students, information on the academic staff, graduates). It is planned that the QAA will use the national system of higher education information also for the institutional assessment.

As a general conclusion from the survey of representatives of the QAAs and publicly available information, the agencies rarely use the national data monitoring systems even when there is such a system in place. The agencies in most cases do not report to the national monitoring system. When it comes to the use of the data available on the national monitoring system, they are mostly used to obtain background data for quality assurance procedures, but are not used directly in the procedures and do not have a direct impact on the assessment result.

General higher education monitoring actions exist in parallel to the activities of the QAAs and decisions and policy initiatives do not necessarily have any relation to one another. In practice, this means that there are several separately designed systems for collecting data on different education-related matters (general information and information specifically for quality assurance), several reports (also statistical) required from HEIs. HEIs submit information to several organisations (respective ministries, QAAs, and national education monitoring authorities). The information overlaps and the use of resources is not efficient. Additionally, design of separate IT systems complicates the overall management of data on higher education.

5. Monitoring and quality assurance: country comparison and the case of Baltic countries

5.1. Lithuania

In the Lithuanian context there are four institutions directly involved in monitoring data on higher education. These institutions are – the Lithuanian Research Council (LRC) under the Parliament of Lithuania, MOSTA under the Government of Lithuania, the Centre of Information Technologies in Education (ITC) and the Office of Ombudsman for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania (OOAEPRL) under the Ministry of Education.

The external quality assurance procedures in Lithuania are performed by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC). The SKVC performs accreditation of study programmes, accreditation of HEIs and evaluation to determine HEI's eligibility to offer higher education.

The SKVC is not an owner of any information system but has the rights of a privileged user for several systems. It receives information from the LRC, ITC, MOSTA and OOAEPRL on-request.

One of the tasks of MOSTA is the preparation of an annual report on higher education but these reports are not available in a dynamic open system and they are mostly available only in Lithuanian.

Among other tasks, MOSTA also monitors the compliance of learning resources held by HEIs with the baseline requirements (MOSTA, 2017) according to the methodology approved by ministerial directives.¹ The reports compiled by MOSTA are used by SKVC as a source of information for institutional reviews, alongside the self-evaluation

¹ Methodology for MOSTA reports <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.BA58DEFD9A3E/jnURRdcyNf> (available only in Lithuanian)

report. Until autumn 2014, MOSTA used to present its evaluation on the compliance of learning resources and a negative evaluation by MOSTA would lead to a negative evaluation of the entire performance of a HEI by SKVC. According to the methodology of the SKVC, institutions are assessed in four areas – strategic management, academic studies and life-long learning, research and/or artistic activities, and the impact of the HEI on regional and national development. Between 2011 and November 2014 there were two HEIs that received a negative assessment following the negative evaluation of learning resources.

In 2014, following a court case where a HEI had lodged complaints against the legitimacy of the negative decision made on the basis of evaluation of learning resources, the Government's resolution was amended and evaluation of learning resources conducted by MOSTA does not have direct impact on accreditation decisions.

In 2012, during the external review of SKVC by ENQA, the experts assessed its compliance with the ESG standard 3.7 (external quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies) as substantially compliant due to the lack of clarity regarding the role of MOSTA in the overall assessment criteria and process.

In the self-evaluation report prepared for the ENQA review in 2017, the SKVC mentioned that in 2014 an amendment on the Governmental Resolution was made. As a result, the role of MOSTA was revised. Currently MOSTA produces data that are used as an additional source of information both for HEIs and experts but the final decision of evaluation and accreditation rests only with SKVC (SKVC, 2016).

The expert team assessing the SKVC in 2017 commended the changes done and admitted that the revised role of MOSTA has changed SKVC's relationship with MOSTA considerably and that the expert teams make good use of the data provided by MOSTA. Further recommendation proposed that MOSTA should have no further involvement in external evaluations (ENQA, 2017).

From the perspective of the SKVC, quality monitoring is performed by analysing the results of reviews (performing thematic analysis). In 2016 the SKVC has published an analysis of the assessment reports and their results on the first cycle of institutional reviews (SKVC, 2015). The SKVC also used to produce overviews of study fields after a certain number of study programmes in the field was evaluated (SKVC, 2017).

When performing analyses, the SKVC abstains from gathering additional information from HEIs not to overburden them. The analyses are based either on already available external evaluation results (meta-analyses of data are performed) or by using sources that do not require additional input from HEIs, for example, analysis of their websites. In case the SKVC gathers additional data, those would mainly be in the form of feedback questionnaires, for example, after the review process is concluded.

In 2012 during the ENQA review the experts formulated a recommendation that the overview reports should be produced more systematically and based on the stakeholder needs. The reports should have a clear focus rather than be a part of annual reporting cycle (ENQA, 2012).

In 2017 when demonstrating compliance with ESG, the SKVC admitted that thematic analyses of evaluation findings have been one of the SKVC's weaknesses. Annual SKVC activity reports include summarised information about the positive features, problematic issues, and trends in the programmes evaluated. The SKVC also publishes thematic analyses, the themes are discussed and chosen internally in the SKVC based

on trends, topical issues that are relevant to a wider range of institutions. In 2015 SKVC prepared a number of review surveys, also available in English. (SKVC, 2017)

The ENQA review panel in 2017 still suggests establishing a well-defined structured process for the production and identification of topics and creating a template for reporting. The choices of thematic analysis should be made explicit, and students, HEIs, and the general public should be consulted and more involved when choosing them.

5.2. Estonia

In Estonia the institution in charge of the monitoring system and collecting the data is the Ministry of Education and Research (MoER).

The external quality assessment procedures are performed by the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA). The EKKA organises accreditations and enhancement oriented quality assessments of study programme groups and institutional accreditations.

The main system for information on higher education is the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS)². There is also the second data platform used in higher education – research data platform ETIS³. The EHIS registry on higher education is based on modules, including modules for enrolment, HEIs, teaching staff and curricular modules. The EHIS can only be accessed by identification card (ID). In addition, only members of the EHIS can request personal data and they can only receive data in three blocks – general personal data, data on studies, and data on working as a teacher/academic. EHIS operates with the help of a data exchange layer, X-Road, which allows secure data exchange between several state information systems and ensures access to the data that are maintained in these systems. EHIS data are used by all institutions connected on X-Road and there is a specifically designed public environment for decision makers containing both statistics and data on effectiveness.⁴ The reports on the data available on EHIS are published annually but they are available only in Estonian language. The data on EHIS are mostly collected from the level of groups of study programmes up to the institutional level, with only some data at the level of individual programmes. HEIs submit their education related data directly to EHIS, and researchers submit data about their individual activities (publications, projects etc.).

EKKA is not asked to submit any data to EHIS and ETIS platforms but the data available on the platforms are used by the agency.

In regard to monitoring, HEIs define their own indicators to monitor. The indicators for quality assessment procedures are described in EKKA's regulations and were discussed and agreed by all HEIs. At the state level, the indicators (as described in Haridussilm⁵) are defined when signing performance agreements between MoER and HEIs, which are expected to report back on these agreements.

For the purpose of assessment procedures, EKKA requires HEIs to submit aggregated data on study programmes within the study programme group (a list of study

² www.ehis.ee

³ <https://www.etis.ee/?lang=ENG#>

⁴ <http://haridussilm.ee/>

⁵ http://haridussilm.ee/?leht=korg_0

programmes, responsible structural units, figures related to students⁶ () presented as a three-to-five-year trend) (EKKA, 2017). EKKA indicates that the data on national platforms, to some extent, correspond with the quality indicators from the perspective of EKKA. For example, the trends of international students are used by EKKA during the institutional accreditation. When assessing the quality of groups of study programmes, EKKA prepares comparative analyses of different data (student drop-out rates, graduation rates) on the basis of national data and presents these data to experts. ETIS is also used by the experts for the purpose of evaluating the qualifications of academic staff.

EKKA also uses the data available on national platforms during the training of experts and institutions during the revision of quality assurance indicators and procedures for thematic analyses.

From the perspective of EKKA, monitoring of the quality of higher education is understood as monitoring the results of assessment procedures and performing system-wide analysis. During the EKKA's external assessment by ENQA in 2013 the experts concluded that the system-wide analysis performed by EKKA is mostly focused on the expectations of stakeholders and on the consultation process in setting up the new quality assurance system and it also analyses the transitional evaluation period (2009 – 2011) and its results (ENQA, 2013). In 2017 in the self-evaluation report for the ENQA review EKKA indicates that one of the main functions of EKKA is to analyse the assessment results and to make recommendations for improvement to the HEIs and also MoER. The need for analyses is discussed internally and planned in advance and the results are used both in internal development activities and training courses and seminars for HEIs and also presented to the MoER. EKKA prepares annual and period-based analyses of assessment results which are discussed in the meetings of the assessment council and published in the annual reports of MoER. (EKKA, 2017).

5.3. Latvia

The institution in charge of collecting and maintaining data on higher education in Latvia is the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) but there exists no national monitoring system for higher education, therefore monitoring processes are fragmented.

The institution in charge of the external quality assessment is the Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA), a structural unit of the Academic Information Centre⁷. Currently AIKA performs four procedures – accreditation of study directions, assessment of HEIs, licensing of study programmes and assessment of changes in study directions. The current external quality assurance system does not necessarily offer the possibility to compare programmes of the same type and level across the whole country. This is one of the reasons why MoES would welcome a national higher education (quality) monitoring system.

Currently, the main information system on higher education in Latvia is the State education information system (SEIS)⁸ maintained by the MoES. The SEIS contains the

⁶ Inclusive of total number of students, admissions, dropouts, graduates

⁷ www.aika.lv/en

⁸ <https://viis.lv>

register of HEIs, study programmes, and academic staff. All information except the information about study programmes is entered by the HEIs. The information about study programmes is submitted by AIKA. The SEIS receives data from several national information systems, for example, the Enterprise Register, and also provides data for some other systems. The data on education and science are separated – there is a National science information system for monitoring science data.

In Latvia the HEIs prepare annual statistical reports and submit them to MoES, which then compiles and issues an annual report which is public. The report is static and the database is not public. HEIs are also required to submit data to several other sources such as the Central Statistical Bureau⁹ (there are cases where the data are practically identical but are provided at different levels of detail).

The Education Development Guidelines 2014-2017 emphasise that in order to ensure effective and informed education policy, it is essential to create a system for monitoring the implementation of policy and the quality of education. Such system would give an opportunity to all stakeholders to follow, assess, and influence the processes and results related to higher education. Creating such a system was a priority already in 2007 and currently there is an on-going process for developing the concept upon which the system itself will be built. This concept is developed by an independent contractor in consultation with stakeholders, including AIKA.

The monitoring system aims to serve as a tool for ensuring quality and improving quality in the higher education sector. In this context the quality refers to the compliance with objectively set requirements and the responsiveness to the needs of stakeholders. The concept is expected to include the national definition of quality in higher education and indicators for quality (including the quality of HEIs, study directions and thematic groups, study programmes, the quality of research and teaching), aims and general model for monitoring quality, descriptions and roles of all stakeholders involved as well as the mechanism for implementing the system along with cost estimation.¹⁰ The vision of the MoES is that the concept would cover the following dimensions – the governance structure, strategy, academic staff, students, cooperation and internationalisation, resources and the legal framework. In each of these dimensions there would be certain goals and indicators at the level of HEIs, study directions (sectors) and study programmes. The concept will also describe the role of AIKA in the higher education quality monitoring process taking into account the principles set in the ESG.

AIKA is currently analysing the approaches to quality monitoring by QAAs in the EHEA in order to define the focus and to define the connection between the national higher education quality monitoring system and the activities of AIKA.

Currently AIKA has defined monitoring as a follow-up on recommendations formulated by the experts, as well as performing thematic analysis on quality assurance processes and procedures. The experts recommendations are collected and HEIs are asked to submit action plans on how these recommendations will be implemented. Depending on the accreditation term for each study direction there are

⁹ <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistikas-temas/metodologija/educational-institutions-teaching-staff-and-enrolment-37043.html>

¹⁰ From technical specification for the Latvian higher education monitoring system

certain milestones for submitting progress reports on the implementation. Thematic analyses are performed on three levels – the development of quality assurance system, the results of assessment procedures and specific topics selected in cooperation with stakeholders.

6. Conclusions

The concept of monitoring in higher education has a very broad meaning. The actual interpretation depends on the national context, as well as the purpose behind monitoring and the institution or stakeholder who is using the term. In general, there is an increasing trend to use the term “monitor” but it is not always justified since data collection often does not have a specific purpose and is rarely followed-up by analyses. In order to contribute to the improvement of education policy there should be a systematic, long term and continuous process of collecting and analysing information. In order to use resources effectively, the optimal solution would be a national level monitoring tool that serves the governments’ and the quality assurance agencies’ needs, remaining available to the wider society. The monitoring tool should be available to both policy makers and the wider society. Monitoring tools should not create extra burden for HEIs – one type of data should be collected once and the process of submitting data and reports should be digitalised.

Monitoring system should be a responsibility of the national government and should be maintained by a respective Ministry or other authorised institution. The national monitoring institution should cooperate closely with QAAs to provide the data necessary for the quality assurance procedures. QAAs themselves should be involved in monitoring of the entire higher education system only as a separate function and without affecting their autonomy and independence.

In general, quality assurance should be about quality culture and quality of the processes and procedures. Statistical data in quality assurance should be used mostly to complement other findings and ensure that the procedures and measures reflect the tendencies observed when analysing the data.

Quality assurance agencies should be independent in their decisions and base their decisions on reports of external experts, and the outcome of any assessment should not be free from the influence of external factors.

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Annex 1

Abbreviations

AIKA	Latvian Higher Education Quality Agency
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EHIS	Estonian Higher Education System
EKKA	Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
HEI	higher education institution
MoER	Ministry of Education and Research
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
MOSTA	Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre
QAA	quality assurance agency
SEIS	State Education Information System
SKVC	Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education