

SELF-EVALUATION REPORT 2017

Academic Information Centre (AIC)
Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA)

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIC - Academic Information Centre

AIKA - Quality Agency for Higher Education

CAS - Committee for the Accreditation of Studies

CHE - Council of Higher Education

CLSP - Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes

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

HEI - Higher education institution, including all types: universities, academies, colleges

HEQEC - Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre

IOA - Internal quality assurance

LDDK - Employers' Confederation of Latvia

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

INTRODUCTION

External quality assurance in higher education in Latvia has developed since the restoration of independence in the early 1990s, with Latvia being one of the first European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries that have introduced a quality assurance system and established a quality assurance agency. However, Latvia is still one of the EHEA countries where the quality assurance agency is not a full member of ENQA and is not listed on EQAR yet. Since 1990s the quality assurance system has undergone several systemic changes, which finally led to a structured system with opportunity to be reviewed in accordance with Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Academic Information Centre (AIC) as a national quality assurance institution in Latvia established in 2015. Although AIC has several functions, this self-evaluation report reflects only quality assurance activities. AIC as a quality assurance institution is aimed to improve the external quality assurance system for Latvian higher education, which would operate in accordance with the ESG and promote the quality, visibility and international recognition of the Latvian higher education, covering the entire Latvian higher education system: state and private higher education institutions and the study programmes starting from short-cycle programmes to doctoral ones.

As AIC took over the quality assurance functions just after the adoption of the revised ESG, the main principles were already introduced in the national legislation as AIC staff in cooperation with stakeholders was also involved in this process. However, the self-evaluation working group (Head of the Agency prof. Andrejs Rauhvargers, Deputy Head Jolanta Silka, expert Asnate Kažoka and a lawyer) continued to analyse the conformity of the quality assurance system with ESG in 2016 and in 2017 the amendments to regulatory enactments were approved in order to meet all standards of the ESG.

This self-evaluation report is aimed to demonstrate that AIC carries out its functions and activities in compliance with the ESG (2015). Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether full membership of AIC should be granted and to support AIC application to register in EQAR.

The report includes description of the background of quality assurance system in Latvia and current situation, and the process of delegation of quality assurance activities to AIC, it provides analyses how AIC as a quality assurance institution and the quality assurance system itself meets the requirements of ESG part 2 and how AIC complies with the ESG part 3.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

The self-evaluation report is a collaborative work of the Agency staff and involved stakeholders. During the process of the self-evaluation there were discussions with stakeholders, including the Committee for the Accreditation of Studies (CAS) and Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes (CLSP). Furthermore, the process of the self-evaluation was discussed at the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (Council), which comprises representative authorities of different organisations (e.g. Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), Student Union of Latvia (LSA) etc. The full composition of the Council please see in sub-chapter 1.3.2.).

The internal discussions with all employees of the Agency were held and everyone contributed to the self-evaluation report. Each employee was responsible for the development of certain sections of the report in accordance with their duties. Every week the progress of the development of the report was discussed at internal weekly meetings. As Agency has also new staff members this process gave them an opportunity to be introduced with Agency's work and tasks in a more detailed and deeper way.

During the development of the self-evaluation report the Agency has also analysed publicly available self-evaluation reports of other quality assurance agencies, decisions of ENQA and EQAR. In addition, on-site consultations with the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) were held. The report has been prepared by the self-evaluation report working group that included Jolanta Silka (Deputy Head) and experts Asnate Kažoka, Ilva Grigorjeva and Zane Ozoliņa and was overseen by the Head of The Agency prof. Andrejs Rauhvargers. The final version of the report was approved by the chairperson of the AIC Board Baiba Ramiņa.

The process of the self-evaluation and review of the quality assurance system has allowed us to look at the system in general and to analyse the Agency's internal work, to identify our strengths and areas for further improvements.

1. QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATVIA AND AIC

1.1. Background of Quality Assurance System in Latvia

External quality assurance in higher education in Latvia has developed since the restoration of independence in the early 1990s, with Latvia being one of the first European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries that have introduced a quality assurance system and established a quality assurance agency. The first Latvian quality assurance agency (HEQEC) was established in 1994 in cooperation 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 (HEI). Between 1996 and 2012, HEQEC carried out 2 complete evaluation cycles of study programmes (each cycle lasting for 6 years). The decisions on the accreditation higher education institutions were taken by the Council of Higher Education, but the decisions to accredit study programmes were taken by the Accreditation Committee for Higher Education Programmes, approved by the Minister of Education and Science. The committee was composed of delegated representatives of different stakeholder organizations.

In 2010, the HEQEC went under the external conformity assessment to evaluate whether it was in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (hereinafter - ESG), but the outcome was negative. While expressing appreciation to the HEQEC for the significant contribution to the development of the quality assessment system of higher education in Latvia, the experts group also concluded that the HEQEC did not fully comply with all requirements. The negative report of the experts was one of the reasons for the changes in the external quality assessment system.

Between 2010 and 2012 the Council of Higher Education carried out the project of study programmes evaluation within the framework of the European Social Fund (hereafter- ESF) and a detailed evaluation of study programmes at HEIs and colleges in Latvia was performed within 2 years. Although the ESF project did not envisage the evaluation of the quality of study directions for the purpose of accreditation, it was decided to use the results of the project for the accreditation of study directions, therefore the transition from accreditation of study programmes to the accreditation of study directions was confirmed.

Taking into account the fact that the HEQEC in 2011 did not receive a positive international outcome, in 2013, the Ministry of Education and Science undertook the function of quality assessment and carried out quality assessment of higher education in Latvia till July 2015. In this period, the MoES organized both the accreditation of study directions and the HEIs, as well as licensing of study programmes. Accreditation decisions on HEIs were taken by the CHE, whereas the decisions on accreditation of study directions 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, and which was composed of delegated representatives of different stakeholder organizations.

Being aware of the need to establish a national quality assurance body that would operate in accordance with the ESG and promote the quality of higher education in Latvia, visibility, and international recognition, the MoES, in collaboration with stakeholders, developed the Concept of the Development of Latvian Higher Education Quality Improvement (approved by Cabinet Decree No.640 of 3rd November 2014). The concept put forward the proposal to delegate the AIC to perform the quality assurance functions. As a result, after the amendments to the Law On Institutions of Higher Education and the adoption of three new Regulations by the Cabinet of Ministers (No. 407, No. 408., and No. 409 of 14 July 2015), the Academic Information Centre became the institution responsible for quality assurance in higher education.

1.2. Current System of Quality Assurance in Latvia

The background information about the higher education system in Latvia is available in Appendix 1. The amendments to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education (Latvijas Vestnesis 257 (5317)) (hereinafter - Law on HEIs), came into force on the 1st July 2015 and authorised the AIC as the institution responsible for quality assurance in higher education. In order to perform quality assurance functions AIC established Accreditation department named "Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA)". AIKA is the abbreviation of "Quality Agency for Higher Education" in Latvian language and is used to distinguish the AIC role as the quality assurance agency. After the amendments to the Law on HEIs came into force, the corresponding regulations of Cabinet of Ministers were elaborated and introduced:

- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 407 "Regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions";
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 408 "Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 409 "Price-list of the foundation "Academic Information Centre"".

According to the Law on HEIs a higher education institution or college is entitled to issue Staterecognised diplomas for the acquisition of the relevant study programme if the following conditions have been fulfilled:

- 1) the relevant higher education institution or college is accredited;
- 2) the relevant study programme is accredited;
- 3) the constitution of the higher education institution or the by-law of the college has been approved by the Saeima or accordingly by the Cabinet.

Currently there are three main quality assurance processes performed in Latvia - accreditation of HEI, accreditation of study direction and licensing of study programme.

Accreditation of higher education institution - assessment of the work organisation and quality of resources of a HEI as a result of which the HEI is recognised by the state and can issue state recognised diplomas.

The HEIs are accredited for an indefinite term and the extraordinary accreditation of a HEI can be initiated only in case of violations of regulatory acts. The decision on the accreditation of a HEI is taken by CHE.

Accreditation of study direction – assessment with the purpose of determining the quality of the resources of a higher education institution or college and the ability to implement a study

programme corresponding to a specific study direction in accordance with regulatory enactments. The accreditation of the study direction of the higher education institution or college gives the higher education institution or college the right to issue a State-recognised diploma of higher education for successful acquisition of a study programme corresponding to the relevant study direction.

Since 2012, the new external quality assurance model for higher education has been in place indicating the transition from accreditation of individual study programmes to accreditation of study directions. The quality of higher education study programmes, sufficiency and sustainability of resources have been internationally evaluated in the framework of the ESF project “Evaluation of Higher Education Study Programmes and Proposals for Quality Improvement”, which was implemented by the Council of Higher Education between 9 May 2011 and 30 April 2013.

Decision on the accreditation of study directions is taken by the CAS. Study directions can 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 direction) or 0 years (negative decision).

Licensing of study programme – the assessment for granting rights to a higher education institution or its branches to implement a 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 CLSP

1.3. Status and Organisational Structure

1.3.1. AIC History, Activities and Organisational Structure

The Academic Information Centre (AIC) is a public non-profit foundation established in 1994 by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Institute of Mathematics and Computer Science of the University of Latvia. AIC performs functions and tasks, authorised by the Laws and Cabinet regulations, related to quality assurance and recognition and transparency tools (set on the legislative level and also by an agreement between AIC and Ministry of Education and Science).

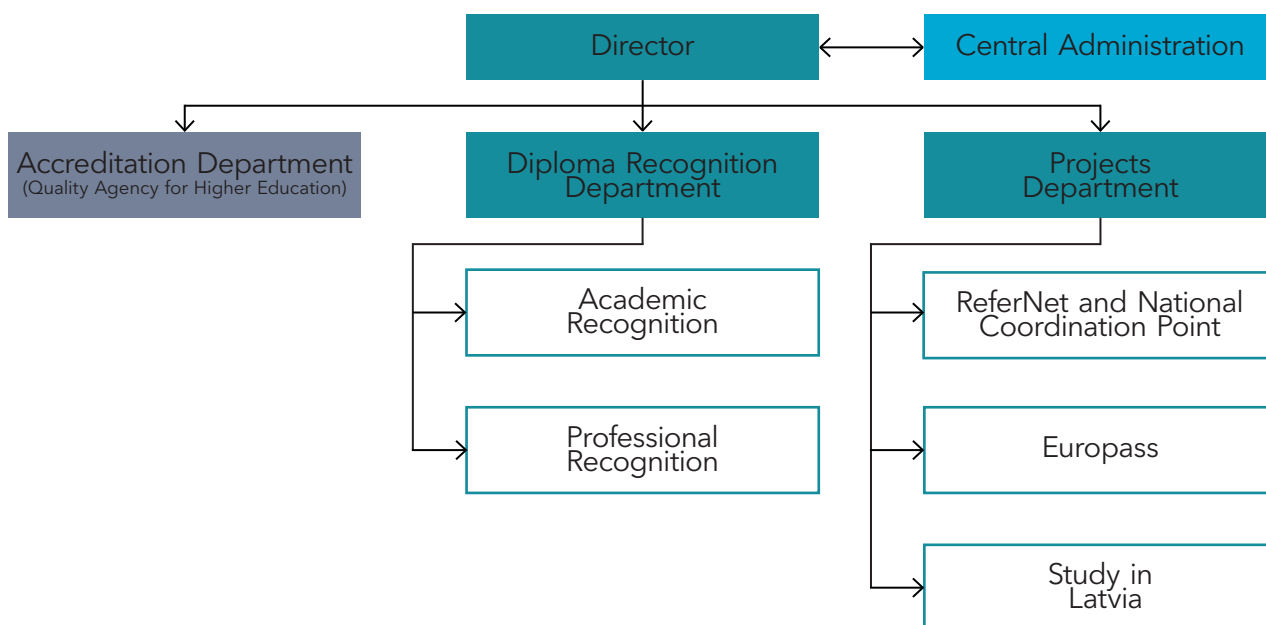
The main objectives of AIC stated in its Statutes are as follows:

- 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 directions and licensing of study programmes.

AIC currently undertakes the following functions:

- The Latvian representative in European recognition/information networks: ENIC (Council of Europe/UNESCO European network of recognition and Information Centres) and NARIC (EU Network of Academic Recognition Information centres) (since 1995);
- Information institution regarding regulated professions implementing directive 36/EC/2005 (since 2003);
- National contact point for ReferNet network established by Cedefop (since 2004);
- National Europass Centre - organises the implementation and the promotion of Europass documents (i.e. Europass CV, Europass Language Passport, Europass Mobility, Europass Diploma Supplement, and Europass Certificate Supplement) (since 2005);
- National Coordination Point for referencing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (since 2008);
- Function of Study in Latvia platform (provides information about higher education studies in Latvia to attract students from the third countries) (since 2010);
- National Quality Agency for Higher Education (2015).

Structure of the AIC



1.3.2. The Status and Organisational Structure of the Agency

Quality Agency for Higher Education (Agency) was established in March 2015 as the Accreditation department of the AIC with the competence to organise the accreditation of higher education institutions, colleges, study directions (study programme groups), licensing of study programmes, as well as the implementation of other tasks related to the quality assurance of higher education. In order to draw attention to the quality function of the AIC, the name of the established department is "Quality Agency for Higher Education" (AIKA).

Nevertheless that AIKA is a new agency (Agency), but it grew rapidly due to several important growth factors. Establishment of the Agency took place at the same time as the revision of the ESG and the adoption of the ESG-2015, therefore the Agency could implement the revised ESG

straight ahead. The Agency also benefited from the experience and knowledge taken over from the former agency HEQEC and, in particular, the database for assessments and the experts database.

The Agency started to work at a full capacity on the 1st July 2015, when the amendments to the Law on HEI came into force. According to the amendments to the Law on HEI, the Cabinet regulations No 407, No 408, No 409 were adopted on the 14th July 2015 (with some additional amendments to Cabinet regulations No 407 and No 408 introduced on the 25th July 2017).

Agency is supervised by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (Council), which comprises 15 members representing different stakeholder organisations interested in the quality of higher education:

1. The AIC director,
2. The chairman of the Higher Education Council,
3. A representative of foreign accreditation agency listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education - representative of SKVC,
4. State Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Science,
5. Director General of Latvian Employers' Confederation,
6. The chairman of the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees,
7. A representative of the Association of Latvian Art Higher Education Institutions,
8. The President of the Students Union of Latvia,
9. The chairman of the Rectors's Council,
10. The chairman of the Association of Colleges of Latvia,
11. The President of the Council of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry,
12. The chairman of the Latvian Council of Science,
13. The President of the Latvian Medical Association,
14. The chairman of the Cooperation Board of Farmers Organisations,
15. The representative of the Council of National Economy.

The chairperson of the Council, the Director General of Latvian Employers' Confederation, was appointed in 2015 for a period of five years. According to the Rules of Procedure of the Council a chairperson and a deputy chairperson shall be elected by the Council for the term of five years. The election of the chairperson and the deputy chairperson shall be held by a secret ballot.

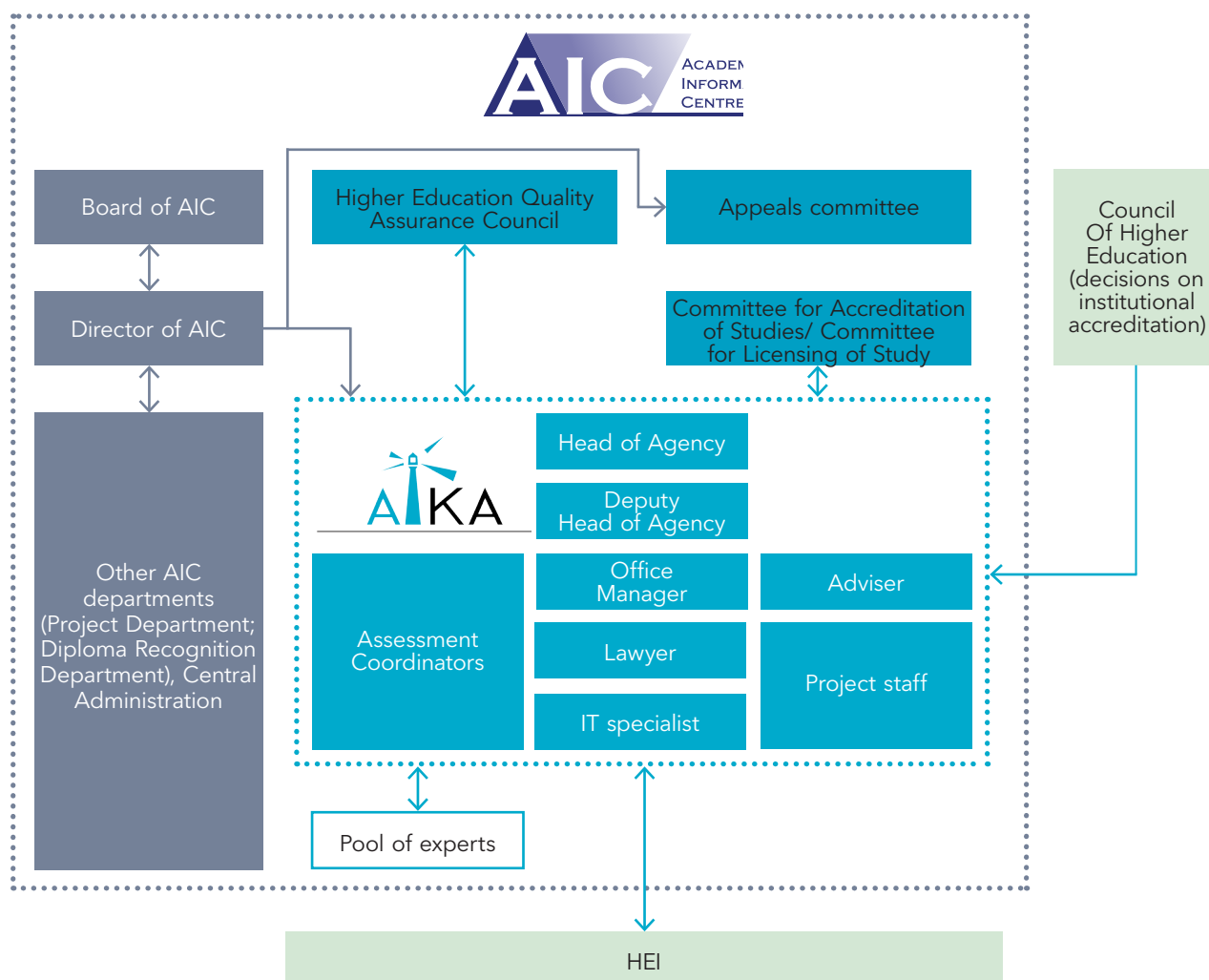
The Council implements the following functions:

- carries out strategic management and planning of the Agency for ensuring the accreditation of higher education institutions and colleges and study directions, as well as study programmes;
- approves the selection criteria of the members of the CAS and the CLSP;
- approves the composition of the CAS and the CLSP, their chairman and deputy;
- approves the rules of procedure for the CAS and the CLSP.

The organisation of work, the functions of the chairperson of the Council and the procedure for re-electing the chairperson, as well as the procedure for taking decisions of the Council is prescribed in the Rules of the Procedure of the Council.

Agency is independent in developing the principles and procedures for quality assessment in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, developing assessment methodologies and in taking assessment decisions.

The organisational structure of the Agency



As demonstrated in the chart above, the Agency is managed by the Head of the Agency, and, during his absence, the Deputy Head of the Agency undertakes his duties and organises the work of the Agency. In addition to the Head and the Deputy Head of the Agency, there are 10 permanent staff members - 6 experts - assessment coordinators (job title "expert" is used in the job description), office manager, lawyer, expert - IT specialist and adviser. The tasks of each staff member are specified in the job description.

The main tasks of the Agency's assessment coordinators are:

- to organise the quality assurance procedures:
 - licensing of study programmes,
 - accreditation of study directions,
 - assessment of HEIs,
 - review of changes to study directions;
- to inform HEIs and society about issues related to quality assurance. In addition each assessment coordinator has one of several specific tasks such as:
- to organise the work of the CAS and CLSP;
- to organise the work of the Council;
- to organise training for experts;

- to organise seminars/ conferences for HEIs and stakeholders involved;
- to coordinate the feedback system;
- to coordinate the follow-up activities;
- to coordinate the activities related to IQA;
- to coordinate the international activities.

The office manager is responsible for all incoming and outgoing documentation and for archiving of the assessment procedures, as well as assisting with administrative tasks.

The lawyer's duties include the development of regulations, contracts, drafts of assessment decisions and assurance the Agency's work compliance with the requirements of regulatory enactments.

IT specialist is responsible for updating the information on Study Direction Register and State Information Education System. Study Direction Register - is a database with information about all licensed study programmes and accredited study directions and which is updated on a regular basis. Also there is available information about all HEIs in Latvia (<http://svr.aic.lv/Form.aspx?id=default>).

The adviser takes part in ensuring the Agency's compliance with the requirements set in external regulatory enactments.

In addition to the permanent staff, for the purpose of implementing the ESF project "The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency", No. 8.2.4.0/15/I/001, a project team (three employees) has been set up in the Agency. The project team is responsible for administrating the project and coordinating the project activities in cooperation with all Agency staff.

In accordance with respective Cabinet regulations the CAS and CLSP is comprised of seven members. In general, the CAS and CLSP members shall have experience in:

- higher education quality assessment;
- organisation of the study process in higher education;
- development and implementation of policy in higher education, science and culture in Latvia;
- developing processes of the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process) and other international processes in higher education;
- promotion of cooperation between the higher education and labour market.

According to the procedure, approved by the Council, Agency organises selection of candidates for the CAS and CLSP and ensures that there are independent professionals with different background and experience, including one student and employer. The composition of CAS and CLSP and the chairperson of it is approved by the Council for the period of 5 years.

1.4. The Mission and Main Functions of the Agency

The Agency is autonomous and recognised as the national quality assurance agency for higher education. It was set up to improve the external quality assurance system for Latvian higher education, which would operate in accordance with the ESG and promote the quality, visibility and international recognition of the Latvian higher education, covering the entire Latvian higher education system: state and private HEIs and the study programmes starting from shortcycle programmes to doctoral ones.

Vision:

Quality 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.

Mission:

- promotes the improvement of quality of Latvian higher education 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 HEIs, 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.

Values:

Integrity: The Agency in its activities, in the implementation of its functions and tasks ensures the independence, transparency, neutrality, justification and professionalism that is provided by adequate selection of staff and experts, as well as predefined procedures.

Competence: The implemented quality of the Agency's functions and tasks is ensured by appropriate competence of its staff and selected experts, accumulated local and international experience, as well as the continuous competence development.

Cooperation: The activities of the Agency, its brand and reputation is based on effective cooperation in quality assurance in higher education with stakeholders at local and international level.

For the period 2017-2021, the Agency's key strategic objectives are as follows:

1. to ensure that the external quality assurance system of Latvian higher education 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 Latvian higher education and to promote the improvement of the internal quality assurance system of HEIs, study directions 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 Latvian higher education;
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.

The main functions of the Agency:

1. Ensure the accreditation of HEIs and study directions, as well as licensing of study programmes, that also includes:
 - developing and adhering to the external quality assessment methodologies and procedures applied by HEIs, study directions and study programmes, which comply with the ESG developed by the ENQA;
 - organising the work of assessment committees (expert groups) for the accreditation of HEIs and study directions, as well for licensing of study programmes, including the visits of experts groups to HEIs and their branches, participation in assessment visits, as well as ensuring the acquisition of necessary information and examining the compliance with the Cabinet regulations;
 - approving the composition of the experts groups and the chair of it for the assessment of HEIs and study direction, as well for licensing of study programmes;
 - organising experts training both prior to the assessment visit and within the academic year by informing experts about this in advance;
 - developing the selection criteria for the members of the CAS and CLSP and for experts;
 - ensuring the documentation and archiving of the accreditation and licensing process;
 - organising the meetings of the Council, CAS and the CLSP, requesting and receiving the necessary information from the national registers;
 - working out the assessment methodology for study directions and the methodology for the assessment of HEIs, as well for licensing of study programmes;
 - working out the guidelines for the development of a joint report by experts;
 - working out the guidelines for the development of a self-assessment report.
2. Ensure the quality monitoring/improvement of study directions that also includes:
 - implementing follow-up activities in order to monitor the implementation of recommendations and proposals provided by experts;
 - collecting data on the implementation of the quality assessment procedures and their results.
3. Perform the analysis at the system level, carry out research, and participate in the projects related to external quality assurance issues that also includes:
 - analysing the results of the assessment and provide recommendations for quality improvement at the system level;
 - collecting information on good practices, to compare it with samples of other countries and providing feedback to the stakeholders involved by organising seminars and conferences.

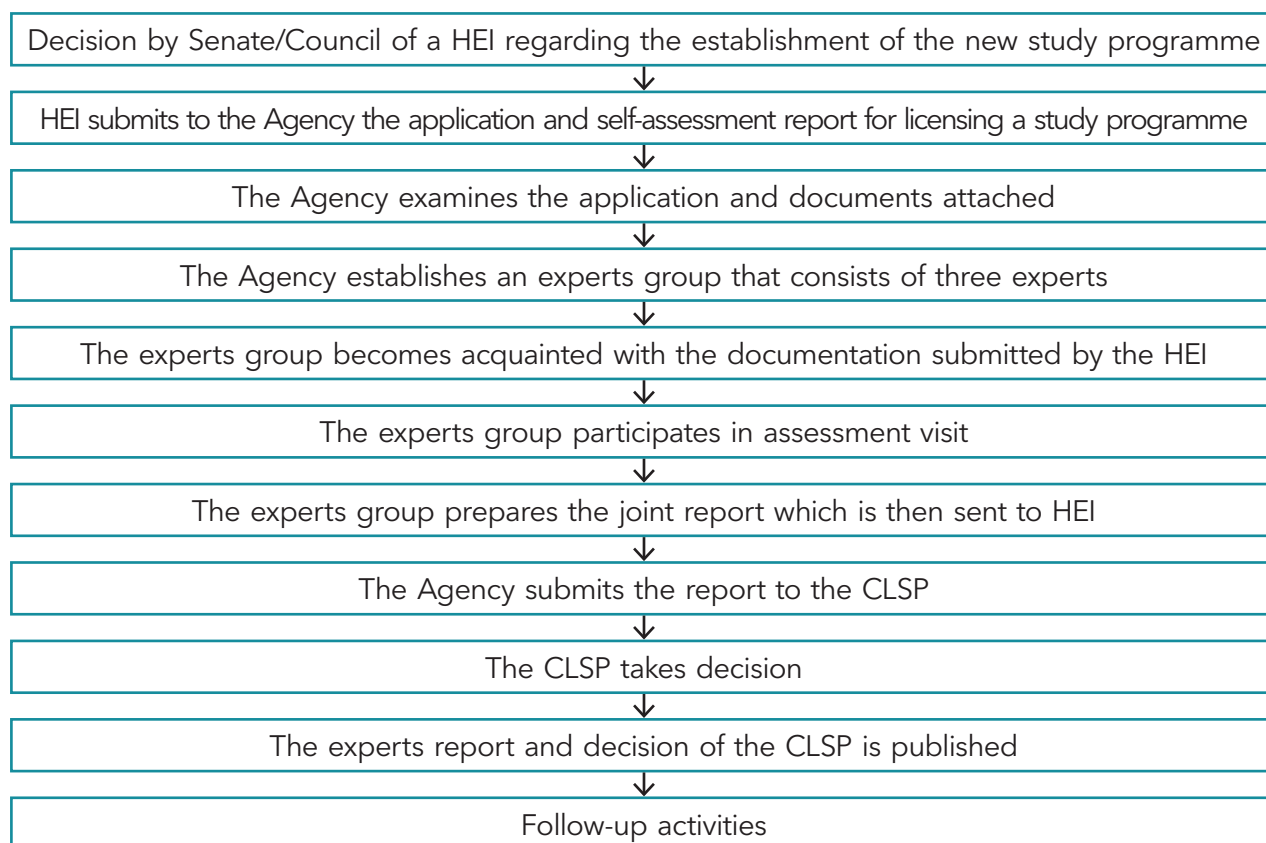
4. Inform society about assessment results that also includes:
 - publishing information on the Agency's website about the accreditation of study directions, HEIs and licensing of study programmes;
 - at the beginning of each year, publishing on the Agency's website a list of study directions, which in the given year, must do their assessment;
 - ensuring the publishing and update of information in the State Education Information System about the accreditation of HEIs, study directions, and licensing of study programmes.
5. Provide the necessary information and support for HEIs and other stakeholders that also includes:
 - giving advice and organising seminars/conferences for HEIs about the issues of higher education, including quality assurance;
 - providing information on quality assurance issues with regard to study directions and study programmes.
6. Develop procedures and guidelines for ensuring the functions of the Agency, that also includes:
 - improving quality assessment procedures and ensuring their compliance with the ESG;
 - improving the internal normative documents, developing guidelines, manuals and other internal regulatory enactments and guidelines.
7. Participate in international networks for external quality assurance that also includes:
 - participating in the international organisations, including the ENQA, the Central and Eastern European Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies Network (CEENQA), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and European Accreditation Consortium (ECA);
 - promoting trilateral cooperation with quality assurance agencies in Lithuania and Estonia, as well as engage in the activities of higher education quality assurance network in Nordic countries;
 - creating bilateral cooperation with other quality assurance agencies by organising visits for the experience exchange and common events, as well as sharing experience in the field of quality assurance;
 - ensuring the exchange of information among agencies by participating in international events and organising such events in Latvia.

1.5. Quality Assessment Processes and Methodologies

1.5.1. Licensing of a Study Programme

Licensing of a study programme is the initial assessment (ex-ante evaluation) to determine the potential quality of a new study programme in order to enrol students and to start the implementation of the study programme. According to the Law on HEI if a study programme is licensed and it corresponds to an accredited study direction in the respective HEI, the study programme is accredited till the end of the accreditation term of the study direction. The process of licensing usually takes up to four months after the HEI application is received till the decision is taken.

The stages of licensing of a study programme



1.5.2. Accreditation of Study Directions

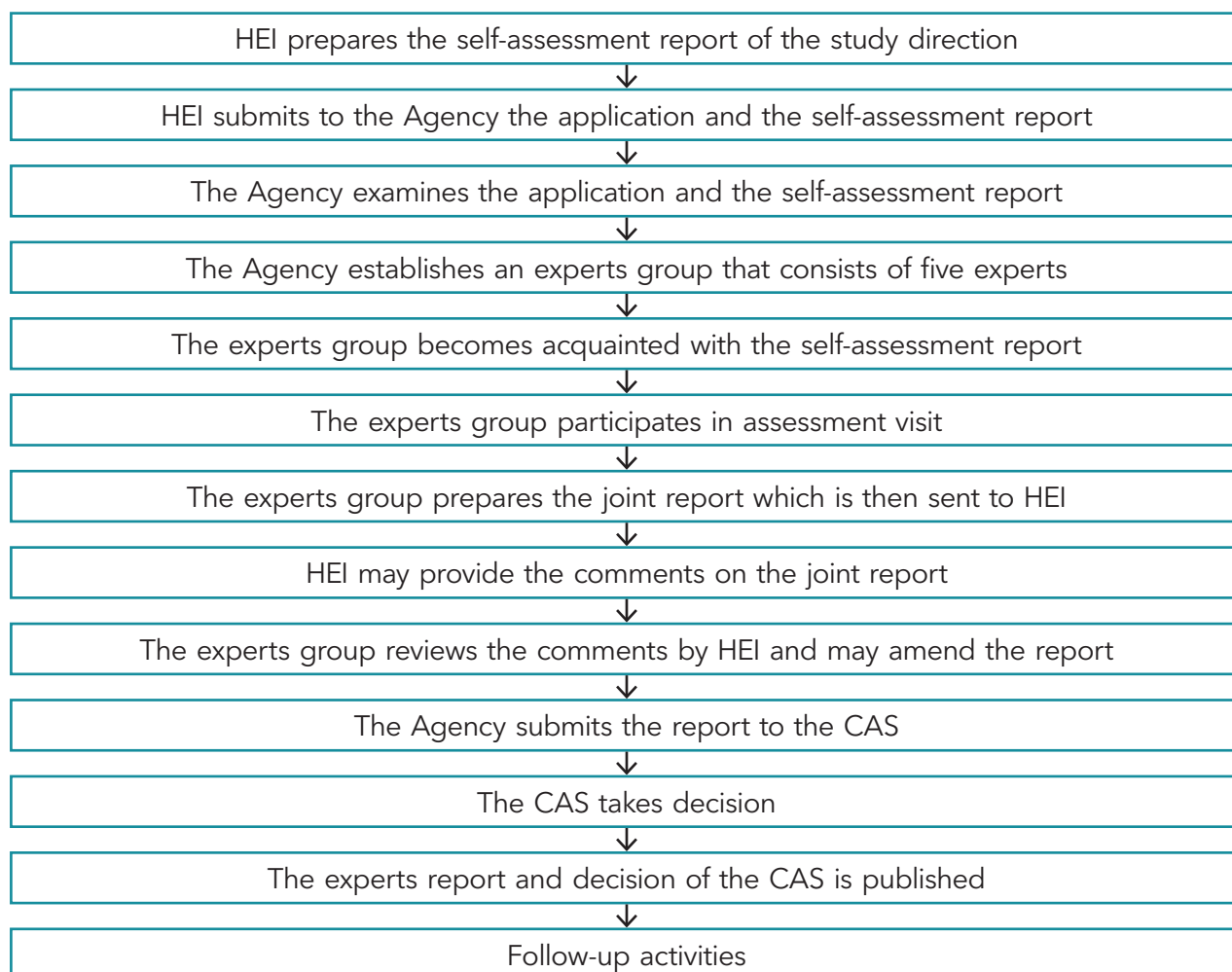
Accreditation of study directions is an external evaluation of study directions (study programme groups) with the purpose to determine the quality of the resources of a HEI and the ability to implement study programmes in the specific study direction in accordance with regulatory enactments. Another purpose of the accreditation is to identify areas for further improvements and assist the HEI in developing quality culture. The accreditation procedure takes six months after the HEI application is received till the final decision is taken. During the accreditation of the study direction, several pre-defined criteria are evaluated:

- 1) the relevance, aims and objectives of the study direction and its respective study programmes as a whole and their clarity, attainability, and compliance with the general strategic development of the higher education institution or college;
- 2) the management of the study direction;
- 3) the efficiency of the internal quality assurance system;
- 4) resources and provision of the study direction;
- 5) science, research and artistic creation;
- 6) cooperation and internationalization;
- 7) activities of students' self-governance;
- 8) the implementation of the recommendations (if any) provided for a particular study programme within the framework of the previous accreditation of the study direction (if conducted) or licensing of a study programme.

As the study direction 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) resources and provisions specific to the study programme;
- 4) employment perspectives of the graduates of the study programme.

The stages of accreditation of a study direction



1.5.3. Evaluation of HEI

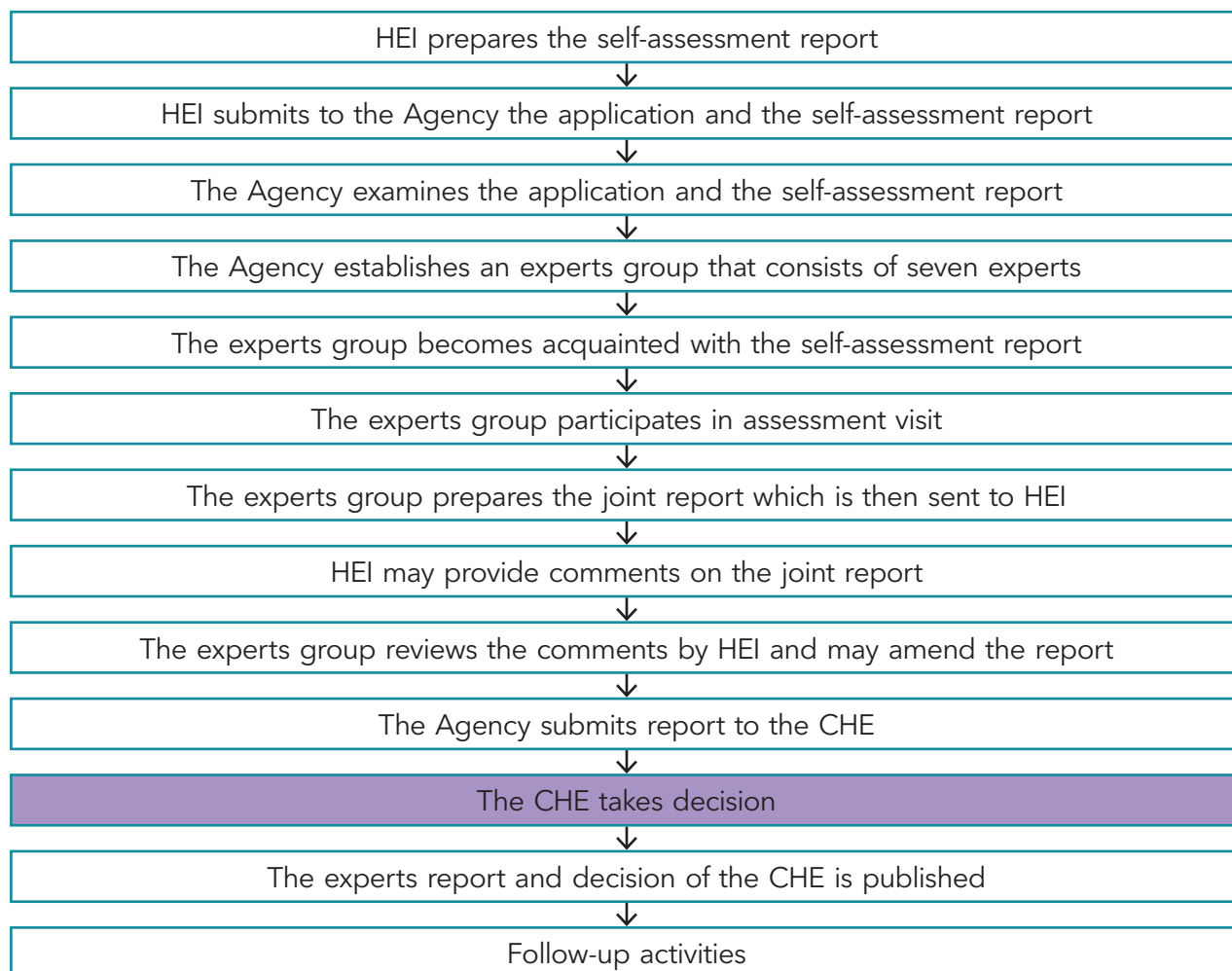
Evaluation of HEI is aimed at assessing the organisation of work and quality of resources of a HEI. A successful evaluation leads to the accreditation of HEI, which grants the status of a State-recognised HEI.

During the evaluation of a HEI several criteria are evaluated:

- 1) aims and objectives of the HEI or college, its management structure;
- 2) infrastructure, material and technical support;

- 3) resources (quantity and quality);
- 4) staff (quantity and quality);
- 5) internal quality assurance system;
- 6) study organisation and management;
- 7) science, research, and, if the study direction "Arts" is implemented – also artistic creation;
- 8) compliance of the activities with the requirements of the labour market;
- 9) international cooperation and internationalisation;
- 10) students' self-governance;
- 11) support system to students.

The stages of evaluation of a HEI



1.5.4. Changes in Study Directions

Assessment of feasibility of changes in study programmes (i.e. study directions) is a noncyclical activity that is done based on the request of HEIs. In most cases changes in study directions are under the autonomy of the HEI and are approved without involving experts. Experts are involved if changes made in a study programme between two cyclical assessments of the study direction fall under one of these cases mentioned in the respective Cabinet regulations:

- the changes to the name of the study programme of the relevant study direction, the professional qualification or the degree to be acquired;

- the relation of a study programme to the study direction changes;
- the changes to the admission requirements in the study programme of the relevant study direction;
- changes introduced in the accreditation period of the study direction in a study programme of the relevant study direction as to the duration or the amount exceeds 20% of the amount in credit points of the mandatory and limited elective part of the study programme of the respective study direction defined in the application for accreditation;
- changes to the elected academic staff working in the study direction or a study programme of the relevant study direction at the HEI since the last accreditation of the study direction, if they apply to at least 20% of the total number of elected academic staff members working in the relevant study direction, or if at least 50% of the total amount of academic work at the HEI in the relevant study direction (excluding the elective part of study programme, the implementation of traineeships and final examinations) is no longer provided by the academic staff members, who have been elected to the respective HEI.

1.6. Internal Quality Assurance of the Agency

The Agency in collaboration with stakeholders (a working group was established) has developed quality management manual, which determines the main elements of quality management system, including 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 the quality management in order to ensure that all Agency staff and involved stakeholders have common understanding and the society is informed about quality standards of the Agency. This manual is available on the Agency's website. The necessity for the improvement of the quality management system is assessed and planned within the annual strategic planning and control process.

Quality management manual includes the following areas:

- general information on the Agency;
- the mission statement and the strategic objectives of the Agency;
- the Quality policy of the Agency;
- the quality of higher education and the maintenance of a quality management system;
- change register form of the Quality Management Manual;
- standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Part 2, the translation in Latvian;
- Process and Measurement System;
- the risk management plan.

The Agency assures internal quality at strategic and operational level. The related planning, operational control, feedback and reporting mechanisms are in place.

In 2017 the HEQAC approved Strategic directions for 2017 - 2021 of the development of the Agency. The Agency's mission and strategic goals are defined in cooperation with stakeholders. The mission of the Agency is reflected in the strategic plan which is part of the strategic planning document for the period 2017-2021. In order to achieve the goals set in the strategic plan there is an action plan which is prepared annually and also an annual activity report that, among other issues, assesses the implementation of the action plan.

Agency's staff meets every week (usually on Mondays) to discuss current activities, share experience and knowledge gained in seminars or conferences, as well to solve problematic issues and share ideas for the necessary improvements. Each employee informs other colleagues about his/her work activities, if necessary asks for any assistance or advice. If there are more specific problems, the Deputy Head discusses them in a separate additional meeting, involving also other staff, for example, the lawyer. For planning seminars or drafting documents the Deputy Head organises a working group which works on a certain issue independently and informs about the progress at weekly meetings. In most cases the brainstorming method in face-to-face meetings is used and complimented with the use of Google Cloud Platform as the working.

The Agency has adopted the so called "open door" policy which reduces the barrier between the management and staff, therefore creating a more open environment. The daily communication takes places in a face-to-face mode, as well as by e-mails. All documents, materials and calendars are kept in one folder on server and each member of the Agency can access the necessary information. There are internal interviews that are held regularly between the Deputy Head and each employee to discuss the work environment, workload, challenges and possibilities for growth. Such meetings help to create more harmonised work atmosphere and reduces the gap between the Deputy Head and employees.

Regarding the assessment procedures, each assessment coordinator, after receiving a new application, prepares time schedule which includes all steps of the procedure. The schedule is then agreed by the Deputy Head. This way Deputy Head can follow each procedure step by step and prevent any problems. After the site visit the coordinators provide information about the site visit, including work of experts group, HEI attitude and the process overall. When the assessment procedure is finished, the comments about experts work, their strengths and weaknesses are included in the experts data base. This activity helps to improve the performance of the Agency and experts work. The Agency also collects feedback from the experts and HEIs on each procedure and uses it for internal development.

1.7. International Cooperation and 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.

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 since 2015),
- CEENQA - Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (since 2016)
- INQAAHE - The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (since 2015)
- ECA - The European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (since 2017 June)

Agency as a partner is involved in different international projects, such as:

- "Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance" (LIREQA), (<http://www.aic.lv/portal/en/par-aic/projects/lireqa>)

- “Developing, Assessing and Validating Social Competences in Higher Education” (DASCHE), (<http://www.aic.lv/portal/en/par-aic/projects/dasche>)
- Twinning project AZ/14/ENI/OT/01/17 (AZ/49) “Support to strengthening the higher education system in Azerbaijan”, in consortium with France (Centre international d’études pédagogiques) and Lithuania (Ministry of Education, European Social Fund Agency, Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre).

The Agency is active in the Horizon 2020 project “An Adaptive Trust-based e-assessment System for Learning” (TeSLA). An agency staff member has participated in testing the methodology developed for e-assessment within the TeSLA project and the results will be used to elaborate a general methodology for e-assessment.

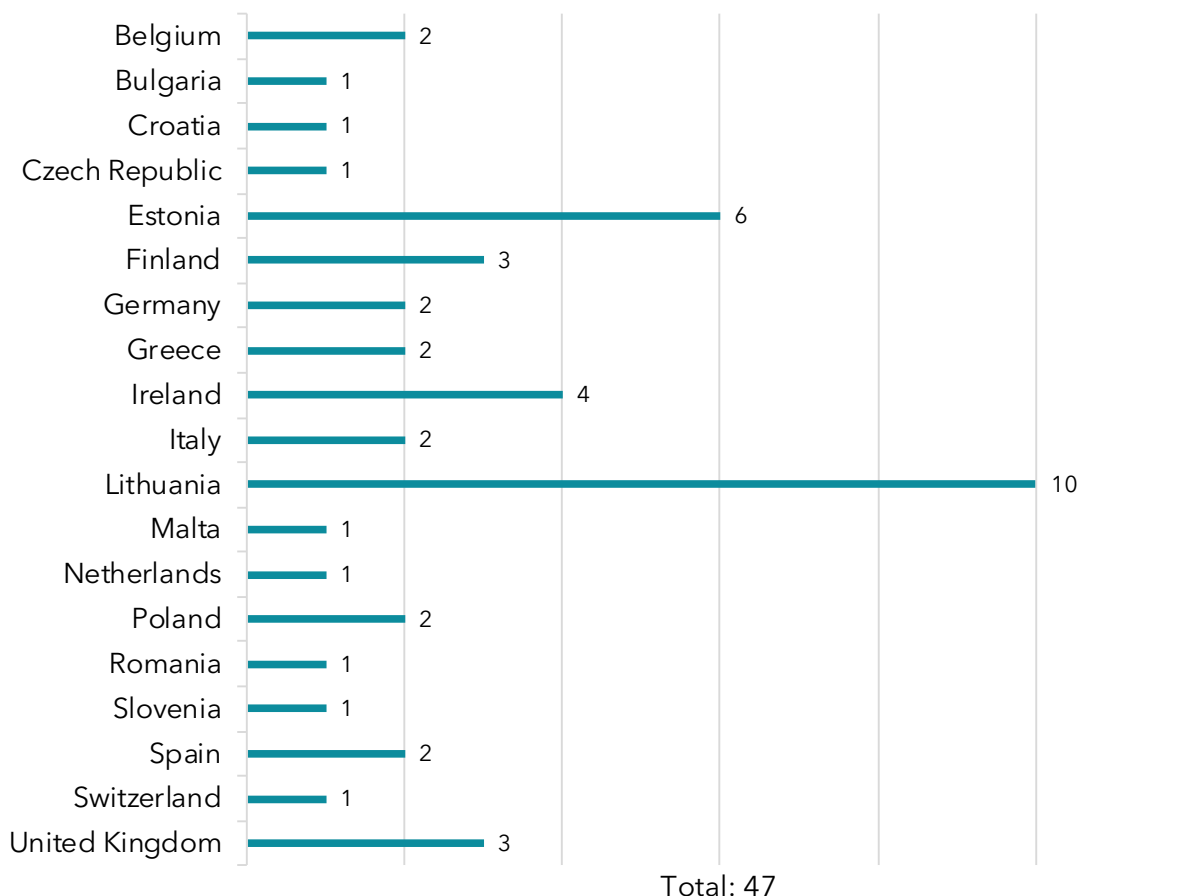
The Agency also cooperates with other departments of AIC and provides support to the implementation of international projects that the other departments participate in. In regard to the content, the Agency supports the self-clarification report for second referencing process of Latvian Qualifications Framework (LQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) where quality assurance plays a significant role, as well as the AURBELL project about automatic recognition between Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

In addition, an important activity for the Baltic region should be mentioned - the annual networking meeting and seminar of the quality assurance agencies from the Baltic States where the staff from the agencies meets to share experience and discuss the challenges and tendencies in external quality assurance. In 2015 the meeting was organised by the Agency and in 2018 it will be organised by the Agency again. Since 2015, the Agency has also participated in annual Nordic-Baltic seminars for quality assurance agencies.

Agency has established cooperation with other quality assurance agencies, including the conclusion of a bilateral agreement with Kazakhstan Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR), participation in exchange hosted by the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) with the possibility to observe the assessment procedures, visit to the Agency for Quality of the Basque University System (Unibasq) with aim to discuss the e-solutions for managing the quality assurance processes and get acquainted with the Basque system.

Another example of international cooperation is the involvement of foreign experts in the experts groups in all assessments of study directions and higher education institutions. The chart below shows the number of foreign experts involved in the assessment procedures.

Foreign experts involved in Agency's organised assessment procedures in 2015-2017



1.8. Resources of the Agency

The office of the Agency is located in the centre of Riga - Dzirnavu Street 16. The total space of the AIC office is 606,2 m², from which 156,10 m² is the Agency's premises, comprising seven workrooms, including one for the project team (28,3 m²). There is also a conference room with the capacity of 40 people (38,4 m²), where working meetings and small seminars are held, one common room and utility rooms. The Agency's revenue consists of the fees paid for the accreditation and licensing services in accordance with the price list for AIC services (Cabinet regulations No. 409 of 14th July 2015). The price-list includes set fees for the accreditation of a HEI, the accreditation of study directions and licensing of study programmes. In accordance with the price list, the revenue of the Agency consists of the ratio from the received fees.

Given that the revenue from paid services is not permanently stable, as well as taking into account 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. 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. The allocation of the state budget is based on the Cabinet Order of 3 November 2014 No. 640 "About the Concept "External Quality Assurance System Development of Latvian Higher Education".

The main positions of Agency's expenditures include staff remuneration, the remuneration for

review experts, the remuneration for the members of SAC and SPLC, as well as the expenses for the technical maintenance of the Study Direction Register and the Agency's website, the participation fees in the international organisations, business trips, the costs related to the organisation of seminars and trainings, including the rent of premises and the costs of invited speakers. The expenditures of the Agency also include the costs of rent and maintenance, office items and communications, accounting services and exceptional expenses, including the remuneration for the work of the Appeal Commission.

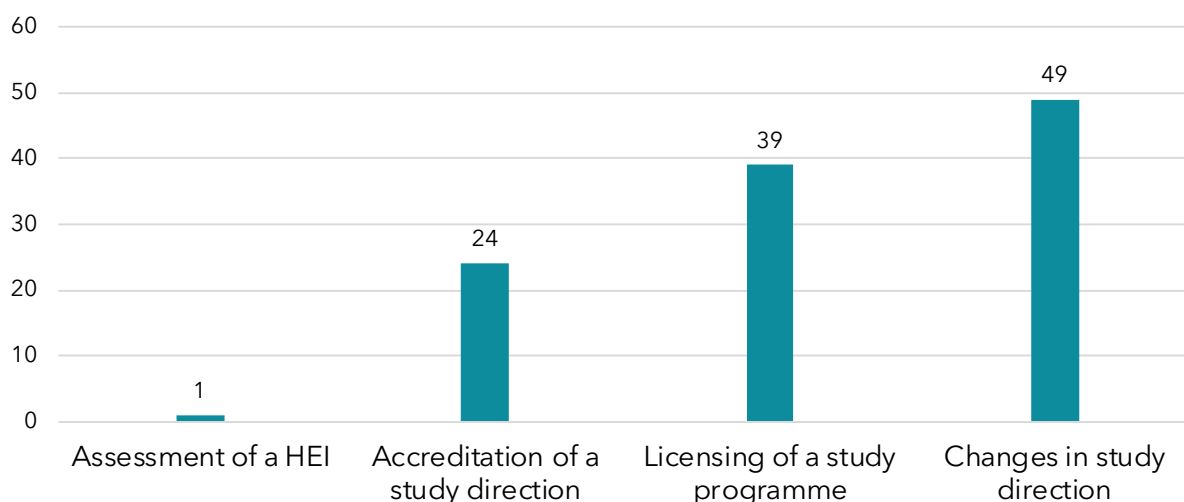
In the planning period 2014-2020 of the ESF and within the specific support scope 8.2.4 "The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency", the Agency was provided with additional funding for supporting the quality assurance activities of the national higher education quality assurance agency and for strengthening its capacity with the aim to meet all requirements for being registered in EQAR.

Funding sources of Agency 2015-2017

	2015	2016	2017 January-September	Total
State budget	257477	257477	281774	796728
ESF project "The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency"	0	104360	317673	422033
Fee from HEI according to the Price-list stated by Cabinet regulations	10919	127526	174581	313026
Total funding of the Agency	268396	489363	774028	1531787

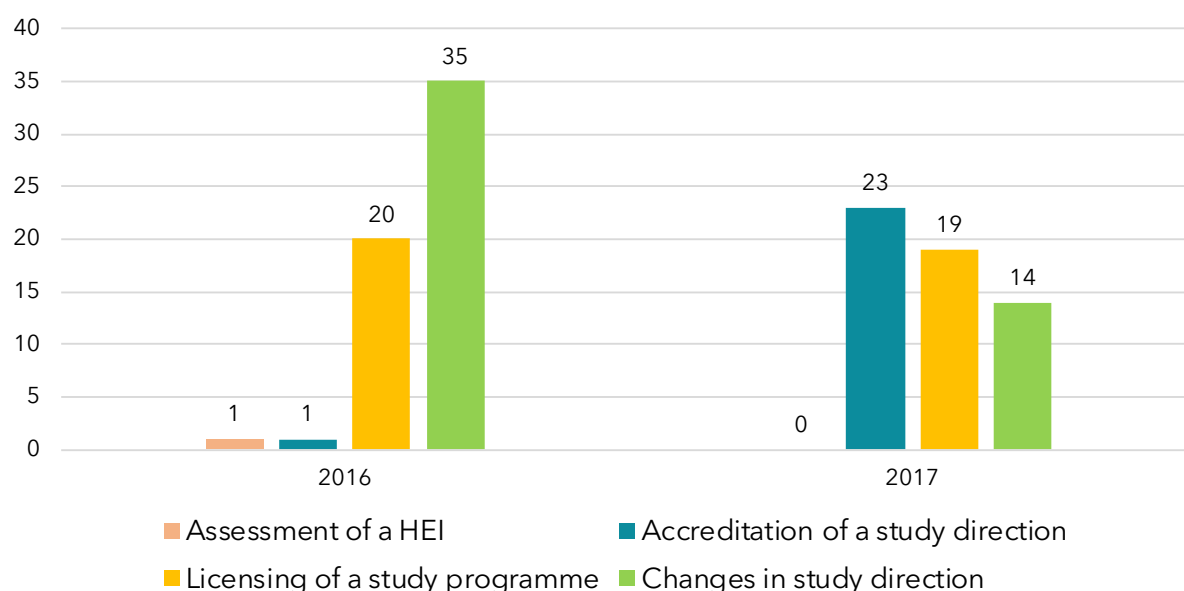
1.9. Results of Quality Assessment Procedures Conducted by the Agency

Since 2015 to September of 2017 the Agency has conducted 110 assessment procedures. There have been 24 procedures for accreditation of study directions, 39 procedures for licensing of study programmes and 46 procedures for assessment of changes in study directions. In addition, one procedure for institutional assessment was conducted.



The majority of procedures was conducted in 2016 and 2017. In 2016 the majority of assessments of changes in study directions was conducted, however in 2017 the majority of study directions accreditation was conducted. The number of study programme licensing procedures is relatively constant, about 20 applications per year. The only procedure for assessment of a HEI was conducted in 2016.

The number of assessment procedures (2015 - 2017)



All study programmes that were submitted for licensing were licensed. However, study programmes received several recommendations for further development. Some of the study programmes were repeatedly reviewed by the CLSP in order to take the final decision. Out of the 24 study directions submitted for accreditation 11 study directions received the accreditation term of 2 years and 13 study directions received the accreditation term of 6 years. The number of study directions accredited for 2 years can be explained by several factors. One of the main reasons is the fact that several of the assessed study directions had received an accreditation term for 2 years at least once previously. There are ongoing discussions about setting a limit for accrediting study direction for 2 years not more than once. The only HEI that was assessed was not accredited due to a number of significant deficiencies identified by the experts group and by the CHE and also due to a significant number of incompliances with legal requirements. The decisions on the changes in study directions were different. Most of changes were accepted to full extent but some changes were accepted only partially or with significant remarks. There were cases when the CAS requested additional information in order to take the final decision on the proposed changes. There were also several cases when the changes in study directions were refused, mostly due to insufficient resources of the HEI.

2. COMPLIANCE WITH STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE (ESG PART 2)

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.

In 2015 at the time when AIC took over the function of the national quality assurance agency, the existing national legislation was significantly revised and AIC was actively involved in it. The legislation was aligned with the ESG in general and specifically with the revised version adopted in 2015 but the revisions addressed the procedure for organising the evaluations more than the content of evaluations. In 2017 the national legislation was revised again based on the initiative of the Agency. After two years of activity the Agency had obtained an extensive experience in organising assessment procedures. The revision of the legislation was based both on the conclusions of the Agency and the feedback received from the HEIs evaluated and from the experts who had participated in the assessment procedures. The aim of the revision was to ensure that all ESG Part 1 standards are fully reflected in the assessment methodology and that both the self-assessment reports of HEI's and the experts reports address all the aspects described in the ESG in a meaningful way. Another aim for the revision was to reduce the burden for HEIs (compared to the previous systems) and provide more guidance for the HEIs and the experts. As a result the templates for the self-assessment reports and expert reports were eliminated from the Cabinet regulations and the Agency was authorised to develop assessment methodology and the guidelines for the self-assessment reports and the experts reports independently.

Just after taking over the function of the national quality assurance agency, the Agency developed a set of methodologies:

- methodology for organising licensing of study programmes;
- methodology for assessing study directions;
- methodology for assessment of higher education institutions and colleges.

As a result of the amendments in Cabinet regulations (in 2017) the Agency developed a corresponding set of guidelines for each of the procedure:

- for licensing of study programmes:
 - guidelines for preparing the joint report of the experts for licensing study programmes;
 - guidelines for preparing the application and study programme description;
- for assessing study directions:
 - guidelines for preparing the self-assessment report of a study direction;
 - guidelines for preparing the joint report of the experts group for accreditation of a study direction;
- for assessing higher education institutions and colleges:
 - guidelines for preparing the self-assessment of HEI;
 - guidelines for preparing the joint report of the experts group for accreditation of HEI.

The guidelines for preparing the self-assessment report and the experts report for each of the specific procedure have been designed together and aligned with each other. After elaborating

the guidelines the initially developed methodologies were revised and updated accordingly. Currently there is a specific methodology for assessing the changes in study direction. Before the assessment of changes was covered by the methodology and guidelines for assessing study directions. All the methodologies and guidelines are published and available on the website of the Agency. The methodologies are available on <http://www.aika.lv/en/agency/legislation/> and the guidelines on <http://www.aika.lv/2017/10/31/arejas-kvalitates-novertesanas-vadlinijas/>

According to the clause 2.2 of AIC Statutes the function of AIC is to support the quality assurance of higher education by organising the accreditation of HEIs (university type and nonuniversity type institutions), study directions and licensing of study programmes. As mentioned in the previous sections of this self-assessment report, the function of the quality assurance agency for higher education is performed by a separate structural unit of AIC - Accreditation department - which serves as the Quality Agency for Higher Education (the abbreviation in Latvian - AIKA).

In order to support the HEIs and raise awareness about the ESG, AIC has organised several professional development seminars for the staff of the HEIs and for the other stakeholders covering the different aspects of the ESG Part 1:

- development of the European Higher Education Area in 2015 - 2018 and quality assurance in it (November 2015);
- student centred learning (September 2016);
- internal quality assurance systems in higher education (November 2016);
- tendencies in design and periodic review of study programmes (November 2017);
- managing and monitoring the institution's information (internal data) on higher education provision (planned for December 2017).

In December 2017 the Agency will start consultation seminars for HEIs on the methodology for preparing self-assessment reports according to the guidelines developed by the Agency. The Agency has prepared the outline and plan for regular seminars for all HEIs, moreover the HEIs could express interest for individual seminars as well.

The core activities performed by the Agency include:

- evaluation of higher education institutions and colleges;
- accreditation of study directions (study programme groups);
- licensing (initial assessment) of study programmes.

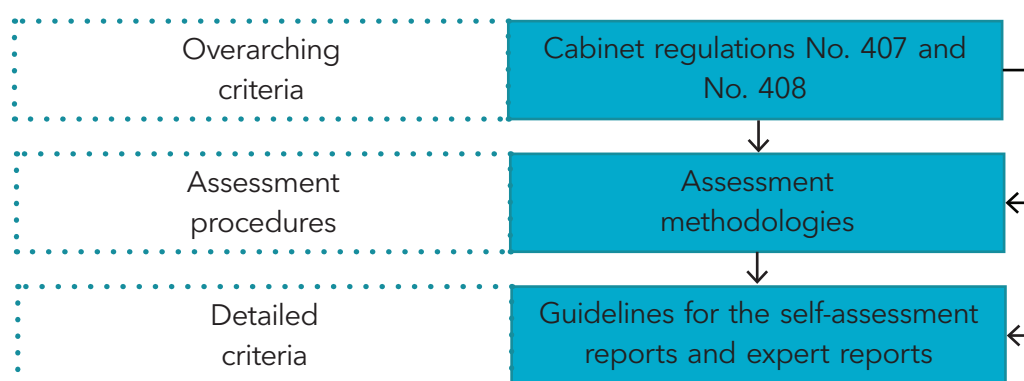
In accordance with the Cabinet regulations No. 407 Paragraph 8.6 the Agency is also responsible for coordinating the assessment of changes in study directions. The assessment of changes is an optional technical procedure that is done between two cyclical assessments. It is carried out only in the specific cases mentioned in Cabinet regulations and HEI must inform and send the request to the Agency. The purpose of this procedure is to manage the provision and provide continuous assurance about what HEIs are doing and validate the significant changes, however the procedure was not initially designed to follow the ESG framework. As this procedure is perceived more as controlling rather than assessing quality, there have been discussions about delegating this function to another institution, i.e. the State Education Quality Service whose core function is to control the education provision.

Among the main strategic objectives of AIC are:

- to ensure that the external quality assurance system of the Latvian higher education is in compliance with the ESG;
- to carry out the external quality assessment of Latvian higher education;
- to promote the improvement of the internal quality assurance system of HEIs, study directions and study programmes

All assessment procedures are performed in accordance with the national legislation and policy documents of the Republic of Latvia and with respect to the ESG. The overarching assessment criteria (identified by K1, K2 etc. in the mapping below) are set in Cabinet regulations No. 407 and No. 408. The Cabinet regulations No. 407 (sub-paragraphs 2.1 and 2.6.) state that the Agency has to develop assessment procedures and methodologies in line with Cabinet regulations and ESG. For each assessment procedure there is a set of guidelines that explains the aspects of each criteria and shows how the criteria are reflected in the self-assessment reports and experts reports. The assessment methodologies focus on the assessment procedure (the organisations involved and their tasks, the timeline of the procedure) but also define that the self-assessment reports and the expert reports have to be prepared according to the guidelines developed by the Agency. Therefore these guidelines are legally binding for the HEIs and experts and used by CAS and CLSP. The correlation between the three sets of documents (Cabinet guidelines, assessment methodologies and guidelines) is shown below.

Alignment between Cabinet guidelines, assessment methodologies and guidelines



The Agency has mapped the overarching criteria set in Cabinet regulations and the assessment methodologies and guidelines developed by the Agency according to the internal quality assurance elements described in the ESG Part 1. The table shows how the ESG Part 1 is reflected in the guidelines for preparing the selfassessment reports and the guidelines for the experts reports as well as the alignment between self-assessment reports and expert reports. The K1 level in the experts reports (or the I level for licensing of study programmes) shows the criteria set in Cabinet regulations whereas the K1.1 level in the experts reports shows the detailed criteria (aspects) that are defined in the Agency's guidelines which are taken into account by CAS and CLSP.

Standard (ESG Part 1)	Licensing of study programmes	Accreditation of study directions	Institutional accreditation
<p>1.1. Policy for quality assurance</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>II.1. The management structure of the programme</p> <p>II.4. Internal quality assurance system</p> <p>II.5. Information about the possibilities to continue studies in case the study programme is closed down</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>II. Management of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K1 (Aims and objectives of the study direction, compliance with the strategic development of the institution), sub-section K1.3</p> <p>Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), subsection K2.1., K2.7.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system), sub-section K.3.1, K3.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), subsection K5.1</p> <p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K7 (Students self-government), subsection K7.1, K7.2, K7.3 Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K1 (Aims and objectives of the study direction, compliance with the strategic development of the institution)</p> <p>K2 (Management of the study direction)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 2 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, governance structure), sub-sections 2.1., 2.2., 2.3</p> <p>Requirements for the section 3 (Internal quality assurance system), sub-sections 3.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 8 (Research and artistic creation), sub-section 8.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-section 9.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.1, 10.5.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 11 (The activities of the students selfgovernment), sub-section 11.1, 11.2, 11.3.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K1 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, the governance structure),</p> <p>K5 (The internal quality assurance system)</p> <p>K7 (Research and artistic creation)</p>

		<p>K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system)</p> <p>K5 (Research and artistic creation)</p> <p>K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K7 (Students self-government)</p> <p>K8 (Recommendations received previously)</p>	<p>K8 (Requirements of the labour market)</p> <p>K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K10 (The activities of the students self-government)</p>
1.2. Design and approval of programmes	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>I.1. Development of the study programme</p> <p>I.2. Compliance with the study direction and strategy of the higher education institution</p> <p>I.3. Compliance with the tendencies in the sector</p> <p>I.4. Development perspectives</p> <p>IV.1. Content of the study programme</p> <p>IV.2 Provision of the internship (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The expert's report:</u></p> <p>I. The reasoning for establishing the study programme and it's alignment with the strategy of the higher education institution</p> <p>II. Management of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K1 (The aims of the study direction, alignment with the strategic development of the institution), sub-sections K1.1, K1.2, K1.3, K1.4</p> <p>Requirements for the section K2 (Management of the study direction), sub-section K2.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), subsection K5.2, K5.4, K5.6</p> <p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.2., K6.5</p> <p>Requirements for the section K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements), sub-sections K9.1., K9.3.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K10 (Content of the studies), sub-sections K10.1, K10.2, K10.4, K10.8.</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 7 (Organisation and management of studies), sub-sections 7.1, 7.2</p> <p>Requirements for the section 8 (Research and artistic creation), sub-section 8.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-section 9.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K6 (Organisation and management of studies)</p> <p>K7 (Research and artistic creation)</p> <p>K8 (Requirements of the labour market)</p>

1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment		<p>Requirements for the section K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates), sub-sections K12.2.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K1 (Aims and objectives of the study direction, compliance with the strategic development of the institution)</p> <p>K2 (Management of the study direction)</p> <p>K5 (Research and artistic creation)</p> <p>K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements)</p> <p>K10 (Content of studies)</p> <p>K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates)</p>	
	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>IV.3 Mechanism for implementing the study programme</p> <p>IV.4 Mechanism for implementing the study programme in e-learning (if applicable)</p> <p>IV.5 Research and artistic creation</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), subsection K2.5., K2.6.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), subsection K5.5.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.2., K6.3.</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 7 (Organisation and management of studies), sub-sections 7.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 8 (Research and artistic creation), sub-section 8.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.3</p>

	IV. Content of the study programme and mechanism for implementing study programme	<p>Requirements for the section K10 (Content of studies, curricula), subsections K10.3</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K2 (Management of the study direction)</p> <p>K5 (Research and artistic creation)</p> <p>K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K10 (Content of studies, curricula)</p>	<p>Requirements for the section 12 (Student support systems), subsections 12.1, 12.2</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K6 (Organisation and management of studies)</p> <p>K7 (Research and artistic creation)</p> <p>K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K11 (Student support systems)</p>
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>IV. Mechanism for implementing the study programme</p> <p>IV.4 Mechanism for implementing the study programme in e-learning (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>IV. Content of the study programme and mechanism for implementing study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), subsection K2.3., K2.4</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K2 (Management of the study direction)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 7 (Organisation and management of studies), sub-section 7.2</p> <p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.4</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K4 (Staff) K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>
1.5. Teaching staff	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>III.2.Teaching staff</p> <p>IV.5 Research and artistic creation</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>III. The resources and provision of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K4 (Resources and provision of study direction), sub-section K4.6</p> <p>Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), subsection K5.3</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 6 (Staff), sub-sections 6.1, 6.2, 6.3</p> <p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.3</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p>

		<p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.3</p> <p>Requirements for the section K11 (Resources and provision of study programme), sub-section K11.1</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K4 (Resources and provision of the study direction)</p> <p>K5 (Research and artistic creation)</p> <p>K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K11 (Resources and provision of study programme)</p>	<p>K4 (Staff)</p> <p>K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>
1.6. Learning resources and student support	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>III.1. Financial resources</p> <p>III.3. Structural units and technical staff</p> <p>III.4. Infrastructure and material and technical resources</p> <p>III.5. Informative resources</p> <p>III.6. Methodological support</p> <p>III.7. Learning resources for elearning (if applicable)</p> <p>III.8. Learning resources for studies in branches (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>III. The resources and provision of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K4 (Resources and provision of study direction), sub-section K4.1, K4.2, K4.3, K4.4., K4.5 (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K4 (Resources and provision of the study direction)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 4 (Infrastructure, material and technical provisions), sub-sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.3</p> <p>Requirements for the section 5 (Resources), sub-sections 5.1., 5.2</p> <p>Requirements for the section 12 (Student support systems), subsections 12.1, 12.2</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K2 (Infrastructure, material and technical provisions)</p> <p>K3 (Resources)</p> <p>K11 (Student support systems)</p>

1.7. Information management	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>V.1. Employment perspectives of the graduates V.2 Planned skills and competencies of the graduates</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>V. Employment perspectives of the graduates</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.1., K6.2., K6.4.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements), sub-sections K9.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K10 (Content of the studies), sub-sections K10.5, K10.6, K10.7</p> <p>Requirements for the section K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates), sub-sections K12.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K8 (Recommendations received previously)</p> <p>K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements)</p> <p>K10 (Content of the studies)</p> <p>K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-section 9.1., 9.2, 9.3., 9.4</p> <p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.2, 10.3.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K8 (Requirements of the labour market)</p> <p>K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>
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1.8. Public information		<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Covered by section 1. Requirements for the section K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system), sub-section K.3.1, K3.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements), sub-sections K9.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system)</p> <p>K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Covered by section 1. Requirements for the section 2 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, the governance structure), sub-sections 2.1., 2.2, 2.3.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 3 (Internal quality assurance system), sub-sections 3.1</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K1 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, the governance structure)</p> <p>K5 (Internal quality assurance system)</p>
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>II.3. Involvement of the society in the design and continuous development of the programme</p> <p>II.4. Involvement of students in the design and continuous development of the programme</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>II. Management of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), subsection K2.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K2 (Management of study direction)</p> <p>K8 (Recommendations received previously)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-sections 9.2, 9.4</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K8 (Requirements of the labour market)</p>

<p>1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance</p>		<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.6</p> <p>Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation)</p> <p>K8 (Recommendations received previously)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.6</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>
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Relation between the evaluation procedures:

- licensing of study programmes is the initial (ex-ante) assessment mandatory for all new study programmes. It takes into account the main reasons for establishing the study programme, the management structure for implementing the study programme, the planned content, curricula and methods of delivery, the planned teaching staff and resources;
- accreditation of the study direction is the main quality assurance procedure and it is currently the only cyclical quality assurance procedure. The procedure includes assessment of a number of elements - both on the level of the study direction (strategy, management, general provision of resources, internal quality assurance system, cooperation) and on the level of individual study programmes (structure, content, methods, employability);
- evaluation of HEI serves to assess how the core activities are organised and managed at the HEI. Currently the procedure is performed for newly established institutions, but extraordinary accreditation might be initiated by the Minister for Education and Science for any HEI. Some of the elements of the procedure overlap with the assessment of the study directions, especially for the institutions which implement only one study direction. The complexity of the assessment is related to the national context. There is a significant number of HEIs in Latvia, therefore the establishment of new institutions is carefully considered and assessed thoroughly. There are also ongoing discussions on the possibility to introduce cyclical assessment of HEIs. In this case both the methodology of institutional accreditation and the methodology of accreditation of study directions should be revised in order to diminish the burden on HEIs. The methodologies should be aligned in a way where one of the procedures would be more compliance based and the other more enhancement based, and possibly tailored to the specific context of each institution;
- assessment of changes is a technical, non-cyclical procedure performed on the request of a HEI. In most cases changes in study directions are under the autonomy of the HEI and are approved without involving experts. Experts assess the changes only in the cases where the changes proposed by the HEI fall under one of the subparagraphs of the Paragraph 8.7 of the Cabinet regulations No. 407. The assessment criteria used for evaluating the changes are not aligned with the ESG since the applications (and the experts reports) cover only one aspect of change (e.g. change of the language of instruction) and they do not cover other aspects that are used in a comprehensive assessment procedure like the other three implemented procedures.

Supporting documents:

AIC Statutes Law on Institutions of Higher Education

Cabinet Regulations No. 407 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions"

Cabinet Regulations No. 408 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"

The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes

The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges

The methodology for assessing study directions

The guidelines for the preparation of an application for study programme licensing and description of study programme

The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the experts for study programme licensing
The guidelines for the preparation of a self-assessment report of study directions
The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for study directions
The guidelines for the preparation of a self-assessment report of institutions of higher education/colleges
The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for institutions of higher education/colleges

The full list with references is available in Appendix 2.

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.

AIC took over the function of the quality assurance agency as a result of extensive negotiations in the higher education sector. The current external quality assurance system and structure was developed taking into consideration the past experiences (starting from 1994 when the first external quality assurance agency in Latvia was founded). The initial concept, based on which the AIC took over the function of the quality assurance agency, was endorsed by all stakeholders (i.e. HEIs, students, labour market representatives).

AIC took over the existing quality assurance procedures - licensing of study programmes, accreditation of study directions, evaluation of HEIs, as well as the assessment of changes in study directions. Study directions assessment procedure being more technical allows the HEI to perform significant changes in their study programmes between the cyclical assessments and still be able to monitor the provision and validate the changes. For three of these procedures - licensing of study programmes, accreditation of study directions and assessment of changes - the Agency organises both the assessment processes and the process for taking decision. For the accreditation of HEI the Agency organises only the assessment process but the decision is taken by the CHE. The Agency is responsible for the follow-up for all procedures.

The main aim of all procedures (as emphasised by the methodology for organising licensing of study programmes, the methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges and the methodology for assessing study directions) is to ensure the compliance of the quality of education with the national legal regulations, international standards, and to provide recommendations for improving the quality of education. The main principles defined by the Agency state that everyone involved in the assessment procedures 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 assessment methodology developed by the Agency puts emphasis on the autonomy and responsibility of the HEI. When organising the assessment procedures the Agency takes into account the specific context of the HEI and adjusts the procedure, e.g. the composition of the

experts group. In case of assessing colleges or first level professional higher education study programmes the experts group would include practitioners rather than highly qualified researchers. Also, when assessing the quality of science and research in a college or a first level professional higher education study programme, the experts group would focus more on the applied research.

All evaluation procedures are performed in accordance with the national legislation, international trends and with the respect to the ESG.

In 2015 when AIC took over the function of the quality assurance agency the Cabinet regulations included not only the criteria for assessment but also the structure and templates for the self-assessment reports and expert reports. AIC took an active part in revising the regulations but could not persuade the Cabinet of Ministers to exclude the templates from Cabinet regulations. The representatives of the stakeholders (Student Union of Latvia, the Council of Higher Education, the Latvian Rectors' Council, the Employers' Confederation of Latvia) were also involved in the revision of regulations. In 2017, after a number of organised evaluation procedures, AIC proposed changes to the Cabinet regulations which finally delegated to AIC the right to develop and approve the guidelines for external quality assurance procedures. The overarching assessment criteria are still included in Cabinet regulations but the responsibility for designing guidelines for self-assessment procedures and experts report is the autonomy of the Agency. The current guidelines were developed by the Agency in cooperation with stakeholders - HEIs, students, employers. The guidelines were prepared in August - October 2017 and came into force and were published on 31st October 2017. The new guidelines address several issues.

As the Agency is generally trying to move the system in Latvia from control oriented quality assurance to an enhancement led approach, the guidelines put more emphasis on the analysis and self-assessment (not description of activities) performed by HEIs and allow the HEIs to demonstrate their improvements since the last assessment procedure. The templates for the experts reports are also more general and less descriptive in order to enable the analysis of the each individual case, as well as to ensure that in addition to the set assessment framework, the experts are able to cover other aspects that they consider relevant. The guidelines also address the workload of the HEIs. The templates for self-assessment are now more structured, they include both criteria and guidelines on how to describe the compliance with criteria and demonstrate improvements. The self-assessment template is clearly aligned with the experts report template. From the moment when AIC took over the function of a quality assurance agency, the Agency has provided consultations for HEI on preparation of the self-assessment reports. Moreover, now when the current guidelines are introduced, the consultations will be organised in a more structured way and on a regular basis.

In order to obtain feedback about the assessment procedures, the Agency carries out surveys for all the experts and HEI participated in the evaluation procedures. The currently available results are from the period between summer 2015 and summer 2017 and they highlighted the needs for improvement that were eliminated by the amendments to the Cabinet regulations.

Supporting documents:

AIC Statutes

Law on Institutions of Higher Education

Cabinet Regulations No. 407 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Institutions of Higher

Education, Colleges and Study Directions”

Cabinet Regulations No. 408 “Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes”

The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes

The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges

The methodology for assessing study directions

The guidelines for the preparation of an application for study programme licensing and description of study programme

The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the experts for study programme licensing

The guidelines for the preparation of a self-assessment report of study directions

The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for study directions

The guidelines for the preparation of a self-assessment report of institutions of higher education/colleges

The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for institutions of higher education/college

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 evaluation normally including a site visit;*
- a report resulting from the external evaluation;*
- a consistent follow-up.*

The Agency ensures that the external quality assurance processes are reliable and consistent through several tools/methods:

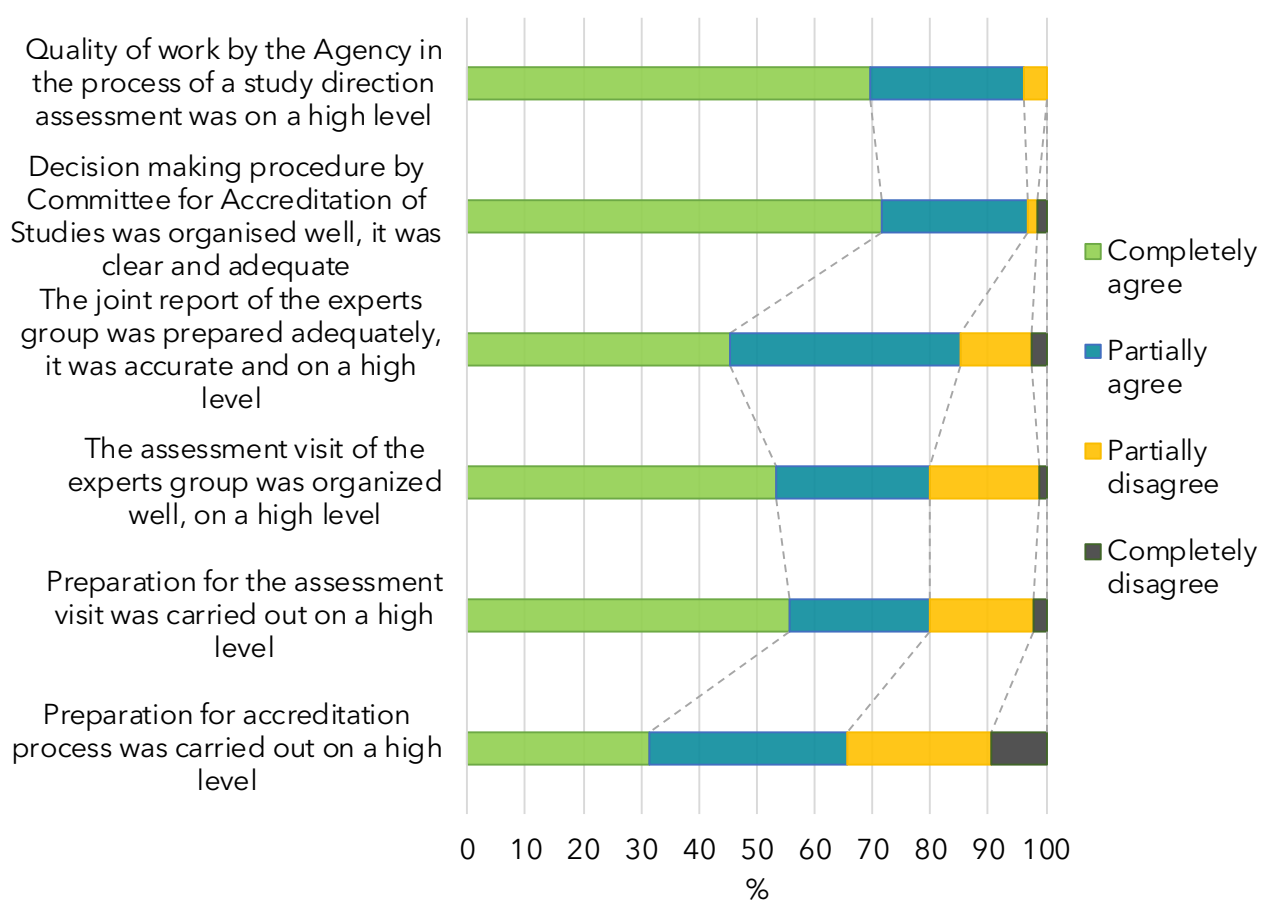
- preparation and publication of methodological tools (methodologies, guidelines for HEIs on preparing the self-assessment reports and for experts on preparing the experts’ reports);
- organising informative meetings for HEIs on the existing external quality assurance framework and changes in it;
- constantly providing specific consultations to HEIs about the methodology and preparation of the self-assessment reports (until December 2017 mostly individual consultations, starting from December 2017 also regular consultation seminars for all HEIs);
- 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.

In June 2017 an analysis about the first assessments of study directions was completed (through a survey for the reviewed HEI and a survey for all experts who took part in the assessments).

Results of the survey for HEI showed that the assessment procedures by the Agency are generally

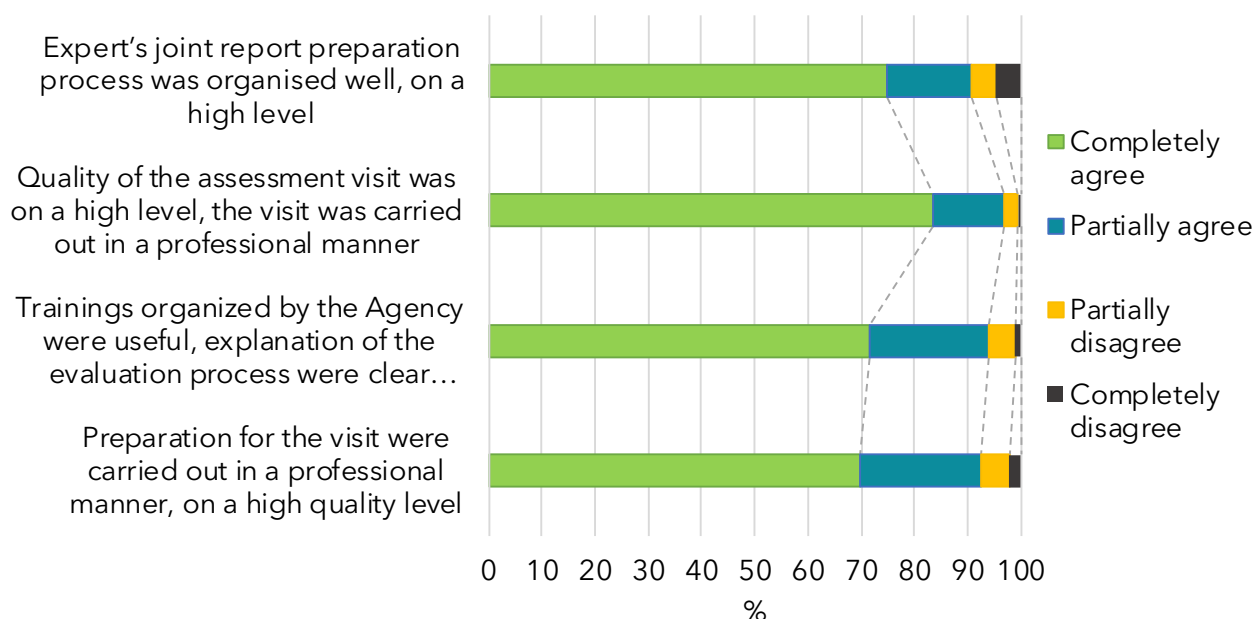
evaluated positively. The HEI commended the support provided by the Agency and the quality of the experts groups, as well as the process for planning the assessment visits. The HEI also commended the decision making procedure by the CAS and the possibility to comment on the factual errors and to express their opinions during the meeting of the CAS. The lowest marks were received in the section "Preparation for the accreditation process was carried out on a high level". This was due to the fact that the issues evaluated in this section covered also the preparation of the self-assessment report and the criteria that have to be addressed in the self-assessment report in accordance with regulatory enactments. The HEI expressed their concerns about the requirements and the structure of the self-assessment report and the significant workload required to perform the self-assessment.

The results of the survey for HEI



The results of the experts survey showed a similar tendency. The experts commended the work of the Agency and the arrangements for the assessment visits. The most critical marks were received in the section "Preparation for the visit was carried out in a professional manner, on a high quality level". This was due to the fact that in this section experts assessed also the selfassessment reports prepared by the HEI. The experts noted that the materials received from the HEI were overall not on a good quality and that the structure of the self-assessment reports was not clear and logical. The experts also indicated that the structure of the experts report was complicated, the criteria were too detailed and overlapping and could be easily interpreted in several ways.

The results of survey for experts



The results confirmed that the external quality assurance processes are clear and that the support provided by the Agency is sufficient. The most critically evaluated aspects were the following – overregulation by legislative acts, the structure of the self-assessment report and the structure and clarity of the template for the experts' report. These aspects were addressed in the development activities that the Agency undertook in summer 2017 and as the result amendments were approved in the Cabinet regulations. The impact of these amendments will be monitored during the forthcoming procedures.

Three out of four procedures performed by the Agency (institutional accreditation, accreditation of study directions, licensing of study programmes) follow the standard framework which includes a self-assessment report (or a justification in case of assessment of changes), site-visit by the experts group, joint report by the experts group, formal decision and a follow-up procedure.

In order to start a procedure, the institutions are required to submit an application and a selfassessment report. The templates of the self-assessment report for the licensing, accreditation of study directions and accreditation of HEI are developed by the Agency and are available on the website of the Agency. For the assessment of changes in study directions there is no template because the information that is relevant for different types of changes is also different. The HEIs are asked to describe the current situation and the proposed changes in a detailed way, to provide a justification and to attach annexes if needed.

For all four procedures an assessment visit performed by external experts is foreseen. The number of the experts and composition of the group depends on the type of assessment is further elaborated in the sub-section 2.4 of this self-evaluation report.

In all four procedures the experts prepare a report. In all cases the report is sent to the HEI before taking the decision. In the case of accreditation of study directions and evaluation of HEIs, the report is sent to the HEIs for identifying factual errors and the experts group has to review them and could amend the report. In case of licensing and assessment of changes in study directions there is no such procedure because the reports are more compact, however the reports are sent

to HEI before the decision-taking. In case of negative conclusion of the experts group, the HEI is allowed to prepare arguments and evidence (if any) for the CAS and CLSP and present them to the CAS and CLSP, however the decision is taken based on the actual evidence. In all four procedures the HEI representatives are invited to attend the CAS and CLSP meeting when the decision is taken.

The Agency acts as the Secretariat for the CAS that takes decisions on accreditation of study directions and changes in the study directions and for the CLSP that takes decisions on licensing of study programmes. The decision on the accreditation of HEI is taken by the CHE. The HEIs have the right to attend the agenda point where their application is discussed and express their opinion. In case a negative decision foreseen it is the responsibility of the CAS/ CLSP/CHE to consider the HEI arguments, however the decision is taken based on the evidence.

The Agency has developed a policy for performing follow-up procedures and has introduced follow-up procedures for all types of assessments.

In case of licensing the follow-up procedure is integrated in the accreditation of study directions' follow up procedure. This is due to the fact that all the recommendations formulated for a study programme during its licensing feed into the general list of recommendations for the respective study direction. When submitting the application and self-assessment report for the accreditation of study direction, the HEI has to address all the recommendations received since the previous accreditation - both the ones received during previous accreditation and also the ones received during programme licensing (if new study programmes were licensed since previous accreditation of the study direction).

In case of assessment of changes, those are either approved or not. Usually there are no additional recommendations, but, in case there are some, they are addressed during the accreditation of study direction so the follow-up procedure is integrated in the accreditation of study directions' follow-up procedure. In case of accreditation of a study direction, the follow-up procedure includes three steps - an action plan prepared by the HEI, an implementation report and a seminar. The Agency's staff member responsible for the coordination of follow-up procedures in cooperation with assessment coordinator, is responsible for monitoring the follow-up procedure and assisting the higher education institution if needed.

First of all, in three months after the accreditation decision has been taken, the HEI has to submit a plan for implementing the recommendations by the experts group. During this preparation process, the Agency's staff member who was responsible for coordinating the assessment procedure is available for consultation. After receiving the plan from the HEI, the Agency would study it and could inform HEI about the necessity to clarify or add certain details if needed. According to the amendments to Cabinet regulations (in force from summer 2017), HEI have to submit a report on implementation of the recommendations, according to the template designed by the Agency. If the study direction is accredited for 2 years, the report has to be submitted in six months period after the decision on accreditation was taken. If the study direction is accredited for six years, the report has to be submitted in twelve months period. The report prepared by the HEI should include information about the actions that have been taken to eliminate the deficiencies that were indicated by the experts group and to address the recommendations that were formulated.

After receiving the report on implementation, the Agency's staff member reviews them and in case there is a clear indication that the recommendations are not being followed the Agency could inform the CAS. The policy on follow-up procedure states that in such case the CAS could review the accreditation decision that was taken previously.

Once a year the Agency intends to organise follow-up seminars for the HEIs reviewed during that year. The main aim of the seminars is to discuss the received recommendations and the feedback on the implementation of follow-up procedures, as well as to share the best practice in addressing the recommendations. All HEIs, which have undergone a procedure for accreditation of a study direction, have submitted their plans for implementing the recommendations but it is not yet possible to demonstrate the full process of follow-up due to the fact that the follow-up procedures include also an implementation report from the institution and this particular change has been in force only from summer 2017.

In case of evaluation of HEI the follow-up procedures are designed following a similar structure that the one for accreditation of the study directions. In twelve months period after the accreditation decision is taken, the HEI would be asked to submit a plan for implementing the recommendations. And then in twelve months period after the plan was submitted the HEI should submit a report on implementation of the recommendations. There are no examples of plans prepared by HEI yet. There has been only one case of institutional (extraordinary) accreditation. The decision on the accreditation was negative and the HEI was excluded from the State Register on HEI, therefore no follow-up has been performed. Another institutional evaluation is foreseen for early 2018 and the follow-up procedure for HEI will be tested then.

Supporting documents:

The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes
The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges
The methodology for assessing study directions Follow-up procedure

2.4. Peer-Review Experts

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

The Agency has defined general principles for the experts work and introduced a framework for selecting the experts, forming the expert groups and working with them.

Composition of the Experts Groups

For different assessment procedures there is a different composition of the experts group. Composition of the different experts groups is listed in the table below. All expert groups have a balance of stakeholders involved and include a student representative (except the assessment of changes in study direction due to being a technical procedure).

Experts involved in assessment procedures 2015 - 2017 (by assessment procedures)

Experts, involved in assessment procedures	
Study programme licensing	75
Changes in study direction	48
Accreditation of a study direction	114
Assessment of a HEI	7
Total	224

In two of the assessment procedures (accreditation of a study direction and assessment of a HEI), the Agency involves international experts. The proportion of local and international experts has been well balanced, i.e. the minimum number of one international expert required by Cabinet regulations in each procedure for accreditation of a study direction has been increased to at least two international experts in practice. Currently 20% of the experts involved in all four assessment procedures between 2015 and 2017 have been from abroad.

The number of experts from Latvia and abroad

Experts	
Experts from Latvia	197
Experts from abroad	47
Total	224

Composition of the Experts Groups

Type of assessment	Number of experts	Representatives and a number of them	Number of foreign experts	Observer(s) (could be nominated)
Assessment of HEI	7	Student Union of Latvia - 1	At least 2	by the Student Union of Latvia, the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees and the CHE
Accreditation of a study direction	5	Student Union of Latvia - 1 Employers' Confederation of Latvia - 1	At least 1	by the Student Union of Latvia, the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees and the CAS
Study programme licensing	3	Student Union of Latvia - 1 Employers' Confederation of Latvia - 1	0	by the Student Union of Latvia and the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees
Changes in study direction	1	-	0	-

The Principles for Selecting and Approving Experts

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. Each experts group is composed, first of all, based on these competencies and secondly, based on the specific context of each assessment procedure. When composing the experts' groups for the accreditation of study directions and HEIs, the Agency tries to include one expert who has participated in the previous assessment, if possible.

All experts are proposed by Agency, except those who are delegated by LSA and/or LDDK. All expert groups, except the expert for assessing changes in study direction, are approved by the Agency. The experts for assessing changes in study directions are currently the only experts who are approved by CAS (according to Cabinet regulations No. 407) but this issue is addressed in the Agency's current improvement activities. The Agency has been proposing a change in the legislation that would allow the Agency to approve the experts also for the assessment of changes in study directions.

Agency approves the experts groups and appoints the group chair and secretary in case of accreditation of study directions and evaluation of HEI. Agency can also decline the experts delegated by LSA and/or LDDK and ask for a new nomination if there is a certain reason and justification. The mandate of the Agency regarding the approval of the experts is a recent change in legislation because until summer 2017 all experts were approved by the CAS, CLSP or CHE.

Selection of Experts

The main source of the Agency for selecting experts for the assessment procedures is the experts database of the Agency – an internally accessible electronic platform with the possibility to update information and select experts according to certain criteria. In 2015, when the AIC took over the function of the quality assurance agency, it also took over the experts database used by the MoES between 2012 and 2015. In order to update the information, the Agency surveyed all experts who had participated in assessment procedures in Latvia between 1994 and 2015 and asked whether they are still interested in participation in the assessment procedures. The data in the database were revised based on this information and updated including only those persons who re-confirmed their interest.

After revising the existing content of the database the Agency developed an electronic application form which is published on the website of the Agency. The Agency also launched a call for international experts which was published on the ENQA website in 2015. Every individual interested in assessment procedures can apply for inclusion in the database by filling in the application form and providing his/her CV. The Agency then evaluates the application and if the candidate's experience complies with at least three criteria set for the experts in the "Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts", the person is included in the database. Currently the Agency's database includes a wide range of experts – both those who have participated in the assessment procedures in the previous systems and also the ones who have been accepted recently and have not yet participated in any procedures.

This database now serves as the main source for selecting appropriate experts for the assessment procedures. However, the Agency may also involve not only experts listed in the database, but also those who have been recommended by such institutions as quality assurance agencies from abroad, employer organisations, students organisations or other policy-makers and partners. Those experts would be approached individually and invited to fill in the application form in order to include them in the database.

Training of Experts

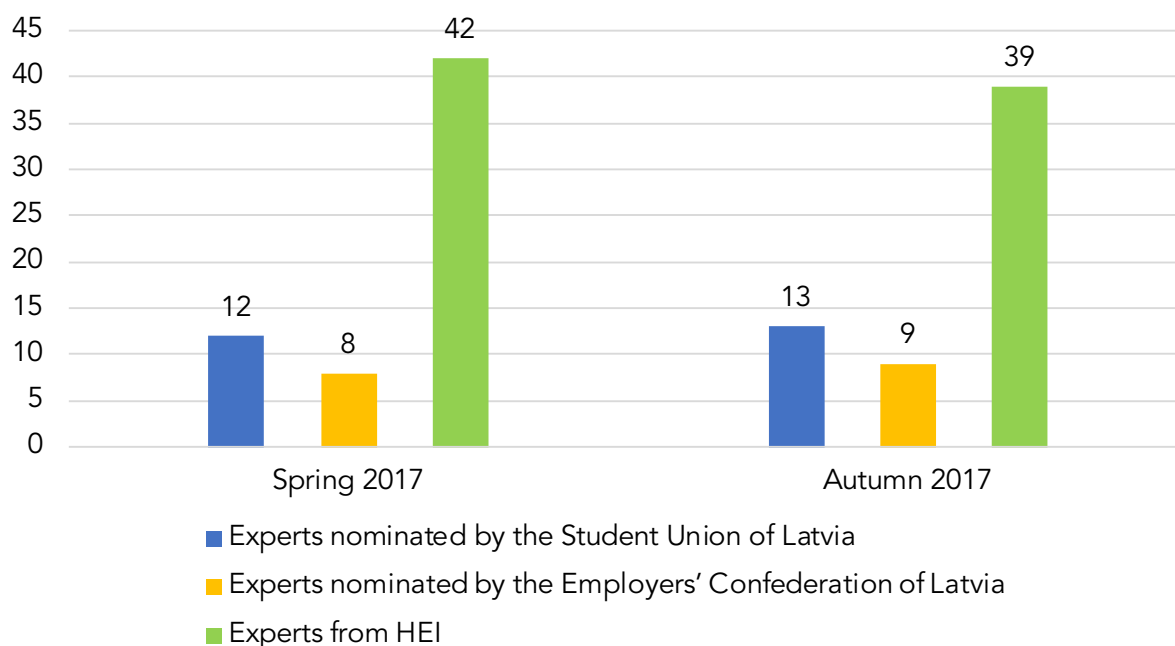
In order to ensure that the experts who participate in the assessment procedures are well prepared, the Agency organises two types of trainings – a separate training for each experts group before the on-site assessment visit and a larger training intended for all local experts included in the database.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

Training before the on-site assessment visit to the HEI is organised and held by the Agency's staff. It takes place before the first meeting of the experts group when all members of the experts group have arrived in Latvia. The experts training before the on-site assessment visit is focused on the specific assessment procedure. The topics included in such training are as follows – the higher education system in Latvia, the quality assurance system of higher education in Latvia, the tasks of the experts group and specific roles within the experts group, the aims of the specific assessment, the assessment methodology and the regulatory enactments regulating higher education and especially the study direction or the HEI under assessment.

The larger general trainings take place during the academic year. They are more general and cover a wider range of issues than the trainings before the on-site assessment visit. The purpose of these trainings is to provide an insight in all assessment procedures performed by the Agency, to provide a more general insight in higher education system and quality assurance of higher education, as well as to provide insight into the ESG. The activities are more adjusted to the experts who have been recently included in the database and/or do not have previous experience. Usually these trainings are divided in two parts – theoretical and practical. The theoretical part includes information about the ESG and quality assurance system in Latvia, types of assessment procedures, experts tasks, assessment methodologies etc. The practical part includes practical exercises and simulations. It is used to assess the experts activity and interaction within a group in order to identify the possible chairs and secretaries of the experts groups.

So far there have been two general trainings (in spring 2017 and autumn 2017) where a total number of 123 experts was trained, including experts delegated by LSA and LDDK.

The number of experts participated in two general trainings in 2017



Besides, it could be mentioned that all experts are trained before the assessment visit and so far the number of such experts is 244. After the feedback from experts on the assessment procedures held by the Agency till now, there have been some improvements in regard to the experts training. The general experts trainings that are organised twice a year have become more practical and more tasks for newly selected experts have been added. The specific trainings organised before the assessment visit have become more focused on the specific assessment procedure. For foreign experts the Agency is currently preparing a short explanatory video and a brochure about the Latvian higher education system, in order to let them get acquainted with the system before the training. It will allow to focus the training of the specific assessment procedure and pay more attention to the application of the assessment methodology. It will also leave more space for the experts group to organise their work internally.

After each assessment procedure, the Agency's assessment coordinator prepares feedback about the performance of each expert in the group. This information is collected in a restricted access database. It is used for the future assessment procedures, in order to create experts groups that are professional, objective and capable to work together.

In cases where there is an experts group, the Agency (or the CHE in the case of institutional evaluation) appoints a chair and secretary. The chair is responsible for managing the work of the experts 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) if the specific criteria are met. Each experts group is supported by an Agency's staff member - assessment coordinator who is not a member of the experts group.

Working Principles of the Experts Group

The work of the experts group is subjected to the following principles:

- objectivity – the expert shall be fair in their efforts to reach the assessment goals and assess the study direction, HEI or study programme in an impartial way. When expressing their opinion, formulating the conclusions or taking the decision, the expert shall rely on facts and information, as well as on personal competence;
- neutrality – when assessing the study direction, HEI or study programme the expert shall work independently. Expert shall not represent the interests of his HEI or any other party and must rely on his or her own competence;
- respect towards the participants of the assessment process – during the assessment process the expert shall perform the duties with good intentions, as a professional. Expert shall not exceed his/her function as an expert. The expert shall address those involved in the assessment process as being able to take responsibility for their actions, therefore, when referring to the strengths and weaknesses of the study direction, HEI or study programme, the expert shall refer to the facts and not express redundant advice;
- confidentiality – all the information that is related to the assessment (opinion of the interviewees, self-assessment report and additional information provided by the HEI) shall be used only for the assessment purposes;
- cooperation – as a member of the experts group, each expert shall be open to cooperation with other members of the group, which also includes meeting the set deadlines. The expert shall assist the HEI in improving its quality culture and shall create a mutual understanding among the representatives of the HEI.

No Conflict-of-Interest Mechanism

The Agency has introduced a mechanism for avoiding conflict-of-interest situations of experts. The Agency's methodology defines the situation of conflict-of-interest and the cases where a conflict of interest is presumed to be present. When composing the experts group the Agency takes into account the possible conflict-of-interest situations and analyses the experience and affiliation of the possible experts.

After completing an experts group, the Agency sends the names and brief biography of the experts to the HEI which undergoes the particular assessment. The HEI is informed that in case of objections to any member of the experts' group, it can submit a justified objection within three working days from receiving the composition of the experts group. The Agency then considers the objections of HEI and decides if the justification is sufficient for changing the expert.

There have been several cases of HEI objecting to the approved experts. In December 2016 the Turība University objected to an expert claiming that the expert had participated in the previous assessment of the same study direction, expressed biased views and offended academic staff members. The Turība University also mentioned a concrete case of a conflict-of-interest. The CAS reviewed the justification and decided to change the expert. Another case of objections was in February 2017 when the Rīga Stradiņš University objected to an expert approved for assessing the

study direction "Health Care". The reason for objection was the fact that the expert was a current medical student at the University of Latvia – a competing HEI. The CAS reviewed the objection and did not acknowledge the justification as sufficient for replacing the expert.

When starting the evaluation procedure, all experts receive the assessment methodology which includes an explanation about conflict-of-interest. Furthermore, when signing the contract, all experts fill in a written form about the conflict-of-interest. The form lists all the cases of a conflict-of-interest are listed and the experts must confirm the absence of any conflict of interest. The contract includes a disclaimer that if any conflict-of-interest situation arises, the expert should immediately inform the Agency.

Remuneration

All experts (including student representatives and employer representatives) receive the same remuneration. The only differentiation of remuneration is between the chair and secretary of the experts group and the other experts group members. The fees of the chair and the secretary are higher than for the other group members because of additional duties and workload. Any member of the composed group can be selected to be the chair or the secretary of the experts group if the specific criteria are met. There have been several cases with student representative or employer's representative acting as the secretary of the experts group.

Supporting documents:

The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes
The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges
The methodology for assessing study directions
Criteria and principles for the selection of experts

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.

The decisions on quality assessment procedures performed by the Agency are taken in the following way:

- decisions on licensing study programmes are taken by the CLSP;
- decisions on accreditation of study directions and changes in study directions are taken by the CAS;
- decisions on accreditation of HEI are taken by the Council of Higher Education.

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. The criteria for taking decision are listed on Cabinet regulations No. 408 and the criteria for refusing the license are set in the Law on HEI.
- For accreditation of the study directions the decision can be either refusal of accreditation

or accreditation for one of the two terms - 2 or 6 years. Criteria for taking decision are set in Cabinet regulations No 407 and the criteria for refusing accreditation are set in the Law on HEI.

- For accreditation of a HEI the possible decisions can be to accredit it or not. Criteria for taking decision are set in Cabinet regulations No 407 and the criteria for refusing accreditation are set in the Law on HEI.

Assessment Criteria

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 Agency's website both in Latvian and English. The assessment criteria are based on such documents as the Law on HEI, other respective national regulations, the ESG and expectations of the stakeholders (especially students and employers).

The first step to ensure consistency of the outcomes is the templates of the self-assessment reports developed by the Agency. These templates are legally binding therefore the HEIs are expected to use them. The templates of the self-assessment reports are aligned with the experts reports. The mandatory training of the experts includes detailed information about the assessment criteria and their application. It is specifically emphasised, that in all assessment procedures the experts group is expected to reach consensus and that in all procedures there is a joint report produced by the whole group. Only in exceptional cases the report can contain dissenting views of the experts and the dissenting views must be reasoned by providing evidence.

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. In the most cases the Agency asks the experts group to elaborate more on specific aspects or check the alignment between the judgement and the justification provided or to rephrase certain sentences if they are difficult to follow.

When the report is accepted by the Agency, it is sent to the HEI. In the case of accreditation of a study direction and evaluation of HEI it is sent to the HEI for comments on factual errors. The experts group has to react to all comments in a certain form, however it is up to the experts group to amend the report or not. The comments from the HEI and the feedback from the experts' group are then added to the documentation of the certain assessment procedure and submitted to the CAS or CHE.

Decision-Making Criteria

The decision-making criteria are generally described in the Law on HEI and Cabinet regulations and further elaborated in the assessment methodologies of the Agency.

The CAS and the CLSP bases its decisions on:

- the information submitted by the HEIs (the self-assessment reports prepared by the HEIs and additional information requested by the experts group and the CAS or CLSP);
- the joint assessment report prepared by the experts group;

- the compliance statement prepared by the Agency;
- the opinion of certified institutions in case of regulated professions.

The decisions taken by the CAS or CLSP are subject to the Law on Administrative Procedure. The decisions are based on the compliance with the provisions of legislative acts and the assessment criteria.

The CAS and the CLSP has been appointed in 2015 and selected for the term of 5 years. In order to ensure the consistency of decisions after 2020 the Agency has been considering to introduce the rotation principle that means approval of the CAS and CLSP members for the different service-terms. The CAS and the CLSP consists of 7 members. The gender balance in these committees is well maintained, though not stated as a requirement initially.

The agenda of the CAS and the CLSP meetings are defined approximately a month in advance, based on the internal assessment calendar used by the Agency. The agendas of the meeting are published on the Agency's website, at least 5 working days before the meeting. Outcomes of the decisions are published on the Study Direction Register (www.svr.aic.lv).

Supporting document:

Law on Institutions of Higher Education

Cabinet Regulations No. 407 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions"

Cabinet Regulations No. 408 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"

The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes

The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges

The methodology for assessing study directions

Rules of Procedure of the Study Accreditation Committee

Rules of Procedure of the Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes

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.

The Agency has designed standard assessment report templates for all assessment procedures except for the changes in the study direction. The current assessment report templates have been improved based on the received feedback from the HEIs and the experts. The standard template includes a cover page, assessment of the study direction regarding each of the assessment criteria (analysis/conclusions/recommendations) and general recommendations (including the one for the accreditation term).

There are three public information sources managed by the Agency:

- the general information about the Agency and the place of the Agency in AIC structure is available on the AIC website www.aic.lv;
- the detailed information about the activities performed by the Agency is available on the

Agency's website www.aika.lv;

- the information about all HEIs operating in Latvia and all study directions and study programmes offered by them as well as the results of the current and former assessment procedures is available on the Study Direction Register at svr.aic.lv.

The Study Direction Register (svr.aic.lv) was designed to include the information on the quality assessment procedures conducted by the Agency, self-assessment reports of the HEI, the reports prepared by the experts group and information on the decisions on licensing/ accreditation. In this database it is possible to check if the HEI has been accredited, to get acquainted with their offer of study programmes and to check whether the respective study direction has been accredited (the study directions can be searched in the division "Study Programmes", subdivision "By Study Direction").

In the Study Direction Register, the information about HEI can be filtered according to the following criteria:

- an accredited HEI;
- a registered non-accredited HEI;
- a branch of a HEI.

Study programmes can be filtered according to the following criteria:

- by the study direction to which the study programme belongs to;
- by the type of a study programme, for example, a Bachelor's degree programme, a Master's degree programme, a doctoral study programme, etc.;
- by the thematic fields of education;
- by the HEI;
- by the place where the study programme is implemented, i.e., Riga;
- by study programme, implemented jointly by Latvian HEI, or by study programme, implemented jointly by Latvian HEI and foreign HEI.

The Study Direction Register includes full self-assessment reports of the HEIs and full expert reports. The experts reports are always published together with the information on the decision regarding accreditation of a study direction, accreditation of a HEI, licensing of a new study programme or changes in the study direction.

For the accreditation procedure of study direction, the self-assessment reports and joint reports of the experts group are published in the section "Accreditation", which can be found by selecting "Direction" or "Institution". The reports are available in the section "Documents". Both reports are published in two languages - Latvian and English.

For licensing of study programmes, the self-assessment reports and joint reports of experts are published in section "Study Programmes", which can be found by selecting "Study Direction" or by "Type", or by "Thematic Group", or by "Institution", or by "Place of Implementation". The reports are available in the section "Documents". The self-assessment reports and joint reports of experts are currently published only in Latvian.

For easier access for the English speaking audience this information is also available through the website www.aika.lv under the section 'Information' and includes links to the Study Direction Register.

The information is divided into the following sub-sections:

- information about accreditation procedures of study directions where the link to the self-assessment report of the respective study direction, as well as the joint report by experts in both Latvian and English languages is available;
- information about licensing procedures of study programmes where the link to the description of study programmes to be licensed, as well as the joint report of experts is available;
- information about changes to a study direction, where the link to an application on changes to a study direction and the report by an expert is available.

The information about accreditation of study directions is available both in Latvian and English but the information about licensing of study programmes and assessing changes to a study direction is available only in Latvian. This is due to the fact that only Latvian experts are involved in licensing of study programmes and assessing changes to a study direction.

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 assessing study directions, the methodology for organising licensing of study programmes and the Cabinet regulations No. 407 and Cabinet regulations No. 408. This applies to the licensing of study programme where three experts are involved, the assessment of HEI where seven experts are involved and to the accreditation of a study direction where five experts are involved. In these experts group, a secretary is appointed, and the secretary takes on the main responsibility for the elaboration of the joint report. For the assessment of changes in study direction the assessment is performed by one expert. T

he experts group prepares the draft report which is then reviewed by two staff members of the Agency, those usually are the assessment coordinator responsible for the specific quality assessment procedure and the Deputy Head of the Agency. In case of possible disputes the lawyer also reviews the experts report. The review is done with the aim to ensure consistency between the judgements and justifications and to ensure that the criteria are fully covered. The Agency staff members could provide comments about alignment, insufficient proofs, the lack of justifications and analysis as well as ask the experts group to amend the report. The Agency would not affect the judgements of the experts group or the substance of the report but would only indicate where additional clarifications are needed. When the report is accepted by the Agency, it is sent to the HEI.

In the case of assessment of HEI and accreditation of a study direction the HEI are invited to comment on factual errors. The HEIs could provide comments on factual errors in a special template. The experts group is asked to review these comments and react to each of them. The experts group could amend the joint report if they find it necessary. However, if the experts group does not agree with the comments from the HEI, they could provide a justification and leave the joint report without any amendments. The comments from the HEI and the feedback from the experts group are then added to the documentation of the certain assessment procedure and submitted to the CAS or Council of Higher Education.

In all assessment procedures the representatives of HEI are invited to participate in the meeting where the decision is taken (CAS or the CLSP or the CHE). During the meeting the HEI could express the opinion about the assessment procedure and related issues as well as have the chance to reply on additional questions asked by the CAS and the CLSP.

Supporting documents:

The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes
The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges
The methodology for assessing study directions
The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the experts for study programme licensing
The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for study directions
The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for institutions of higher education/colleges

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.

For dealing with complaints, the Agency has adjusted the standard procedure for receiving any incoming letters or documents but for appeals a specific Appeals Procedure has been designed.

Complaints Process

The answer to the complaints received in the form of an email is prepared within five working days, the answer for the complaints received in the form of a formal letter is prepared within one month. Up to this date only two cases of received written complaints have been registered. In first case, the complaint was received from the Business Management College (BMC) about the assessment of a study direction. The written complaint of the BMC indicated aggressive behaviour of one of the experts and the inappropriate behaviour was explained for the mentioned expert being an employee of a competing HEI in Latvia. However, a possible conflict-of-interest was excluded as the expert's work experience had been analysed by the Agency before the expert was invited. Due to a significant amount of clarifications needed and missing documents the first day of the interviews was very intensive and thus the experts group did not manage to create a positive atmosphere. The Agency's assessment coordinator had already asked the experts to reconsider the approach and make sure that the experts group follows the working principles set by the Agency. The Agency's assessment coordinator had also assured BMC that the experts group was selected carefully and briefed properly and that there is no conflict-of-interest.

After receiving the letter from the BMC the experts group (especially the chair) was once again briefed about the working principles and possible consequences. It was once again agreed that the chair will be in charge of all interviews and the other experts will be invited to ask their questions and should not dominate the interviews. The situation during the second day of the site visit was much improved and the visit ended on a positive note.

The other complaint was received from the Riga Technical University when a conditional decision on the study direction accreditation was taken. The university claimed that they were not informed about the possibility to provide evidence for their objections, as well as they did not have enough time for preparation and presentation of the evidence at the meeting of CAS. The Agency reviewed the complaint and sent a letter to the university repeatedly explaining the procedure and reminding the timeline of the assessment that was stated in publicly available regulations and methodologies.

As it was mentioned in the sub-section 2.4. HEI has right to object the approved experts by submitting justified arguments. There have been several cases of HEI objecting to the approved experts. For example, in December 2016 the Turība University objected to an expert claiming that the expert had participated in the previous assessment of the same study direction, expressed biased views and offended academic staff members. The Turība University also mentioned a concrete case of a conflict-of-interest. The CAS reviewed the justification and decided to change the expert. Another case of objections was in February 2017 when the Riga Stradiņš University objected to an expert approved for assessing the study direction "Health Care". The reason for objection was the fact that the expert was a current medical student at the University of Latvia – a competing HEI. The CAS reviewed the objection and did not acknowledge the justification as sufficient for replacing the expert.

The Process of appeals

For dealing with appeals, there is a specially developed procedure. According to the Cabinet regulations and the procedure designed by the Agency's procedure each decision can be appealed, by sending appeal to the AIC. The chairperson of the AIC Board reviews the appeal and composes the Appeals Committee who reviews the justification of appeal.

AIC has introduced appeals procedure for all types of assessments (except accreditation of HEI) performed by AIC, which are reviewed by an independent Appeals Committee. The Appeals Committee consists of the chair of the committee and at least two members, who are appointed by the Chairperson of the AIC.

The appeals procedures are as follows:

- the decision on accreditation of the HEI made by the Council of Higher Education can be appealed to MoES and then disputed in the court in accordance with the procedure prescribed in the Administrative Procedure Law;
- the decision on the licensing of study programme made by the CLSP can be appealed to AIC by filling in the written appeal addressed to Chairperson of the Board of AIC and the decision of the AIC can be disputed in the court in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Law;
- the decision on accreditation of a study direction or assessment of changes in study direction is taken by the CAS, it can be appealed to AIC by filling in the written appeal addressed to Chairperson of the Board of AIC and the decision of the AIC can be disputed in the court in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Law.

Up to now there has been only one case of appeal. In July 2017 the Latvian Academy of Sport Education (LASE) partially appealed the decision of the CAS. The CAS had accredited the LASE study direction "Health Science" for the term of two years. LASE appealed the part of decision stating that LASE has right to award a master's degree without professional qualification

"Physiotherapist with specialisation in sports" because the initial application by LASE included this qualification. After reviewing all available documents and regulatory enactments, the CAS came to the conclusion that such professional qualification does not comply with Latvian legislation because there is no corresponding professional standard, therefore the CAS decided that LASE is not allowed to award such professional qualification. LASE appealed this particular part of the decision to the AIC. According to the procedure the LASE appeal was reviewed and the decision was to leave the CAS decision in force, however the decision was justified by substantive justification. LASE has not contested the final decision of the AIC and has not submitted any further inquiries related to this issue.

Supporting documents:

Law on Institutions of Higher Education

Cabinet Regulations No. 407 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions"

Cabinet Regulations No. 408 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"

The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes

The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges

The methodology for assessing study directions Appeals Procedure

3. COMPLIANCE WITH STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES (ESG PART 3)

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.

The function of the AIC as a quality assurance agency is emphasised in the Statutes of AIC which state that the function of AIC is to support the quality assurance of higher education by organising the accreditation of HEI (university type and non-university type institutions), study directions and licensing of study programmes.

The role of the AIC as a quality assurance agency is emphasised in the mission statement of the Agency:

- it promotes the improvement of quality of Latvian higher education 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 the expertise and provides reliable information on higher education quality assessment and development/improvement issues;
- it is a credible partner for HEIs, policy makers, existing and potential students and other stakeholders in Latvia and abroad;
- it's high reputation is provided by the professionalism of Agency staff and experts, accumulated experience in the change management processes of higher education in Europe, including Eastern and Central Europe.

Strategic directions for 2017 - 2021 of the development of the Agency, including Agency's mission and strategic goals are defined in cooperation with stakeholders. For developing strategic directions for 2017 - 2021 the working group with representatives of different stakeholders such as HEIs, students and employers was established. Also strategic directions for 2017 - 2021 were discussed with members of the Council and the Council approved them. The mission of the Agency is reflected in the strategic plan which is part of the strategic planning document for the period 2017-2021. In order to achieve the goals set in the strategic plan there is an action plan which is prepared annually and also an annual activity report that, among other issues, assesses the implementation of the action plan. The Agency has also introduced a Quality Management Manual that addresses the activities, policy and processes performed by the Agency. The Quality Management Manual was also elaborated in cooperation with different stakeholders and it addresses the activities, policy and processes performed by the Agency.

The stakeholders are involved in all governance and decision-making structures of the Agency and also take part in daily work. More information about the stakeholder involvement is available in the section 1.3.2. Status and organisational structure.

Supporting documents:

AIC Statutes

Development of Strategic Directions of the Quality Agency for Higher Education for the period of 2017-2021"

Annual action plans

Annual reports on activity of the Agency

Quality Management Manual

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.

AIC is a public non-profit foundation which acts in accordance with Associations and Foundations Law and operates based on its Statutes. The clause 2.2. of AIC Statutes prescribes the function of the AIC as a quality assurance agency, therefore AIC has established a separate structural unit - Accreditation department (recognised as the Quality Agency for Higher Education (abbreviation in Latvian - AIKA)).

The role and tasks of AIC as Quality Agency are defined in the Law on Institutions of Higher Education (amendments in 2015):

Section 9. Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education and Colleges;

Section 55.2 Licensing of a Study Programme

Section 55.3 Accreditation of the Study Direction

and respective Cabinet regulations (No 407, 408 and 409).

The main functions of the Agency are also stated in the regulations No 407 and 408, however the Agency is independent in developing its principles and procedures for quality assessment and in adopting decisions.

Agency's decisions comply with the requirements for formal decisions under the Administrative Procedure Law and respective legislative acts. The Agency is supervised by the Council, which consists of 15 members. The composition and functions of the Council are stated in the Cabinet regulations No 407 and 408. Agency operates in compliance with national legislation, Cabinet regulations and other regulatory enactments in the field of higher education.

Supporting documents:

AIC Statutes

Law on Institutions of Higher Education

Cabinet Regulations No. 407 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions"

Cabinet Regulations No. 408 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"

Cabinet Regulations No. 409 "Price-list of the foundation "Academic Information Centre""

Rules of Procedure of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council

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.

In its activities, in the implementation of its functions and tasks the Agency ensures independence, transparency, neutrality, justification and professionalism that is ensured by adequate selection of staff and experts, as well as predefined procedures.

The institutional independence is evidenced by: organisational independence, operational independence, independence of formal decision-making.

AIC is a public non-profit foundation which acts in accordance with Associations and Foundations Law, which states that the administrative body of a foundation is the executive board, which approve the chairperson of the board. The main document of the foundation is its Statutes, which are approved by the board and where are stated rights and responsibilities of the board and the chairperson of the board. In accordance with AIC Statutes the chairperson is responsible for all activities of AIC.

The independence is guaranteed by AIC Statutes and management structure: AIC is managed by the Chairperson of the AIC who recruits the Head of the Agency by public competition.

The collegial strategic management body of the Agency is the Council which includes 15 members, therefore its decisions are taken by common agreement. The functions and composition of the Council are stated in Cabinet regulations and the Council acts in accordance with its approved Rules of the Procedure.

CAS and the CLSP is approved by the Council and includes 7 members, including students and employers representatives. The candidates for the CAS and the CLSP are selected by the Agency, based on the procedure elaborated by Agency. The main functions of the CAS and the CLSP are set in Cabinet regulations No 407 and 408. The CAS and the CLSP makes final decisions on the accreditation of study programme groups and licensing of study programmes. Decisions of the CAS and the CLSP are taken by common agreement and in full autonomy.

The Agency is also independent in its operations. The Cabinet regulations define the main requirements for accreditation and licensing procedures but the Agency is responsible for developing assessment methodologies (for assessing HEIs, study directions and study programmes), which are approved by the CAS and the CLSP and in case of HEIs - by the Council of Higher Education. In addition, the Agency is responsible for developing guidelines for self-assessment reports and experts reports, for developing criteria and procedure for approval of experts for the assessments, as well for developing appeal procedures. In the process of developing methodologies and guidelines, the Agency works together with different stakeholders, including students and employers.

The Agency develops criteria and procedure for approval of experts for the assessments and all experts are appointed by the Agency independently of the third parties. All experts involved in assessment procedures sign the declaration of no-conflict-of-interest and confidentiality. Experts and the members of CAS and the CLSP are independent in their activities and do not represent

interests of the organisation that has nominated them or where they are employed.

The Agency staff and the members of CAS and the CLSP cannot take part in the handling of or decision making on applications from HEIs by which they were employed or had ties with in the last two years.

Supporting documents:

Guidelines for selection of the Committee for the Accreditation of Studies and Committee for Licensing Study Programmes
Criteria and principles for the selection of experts

3.4. Thematic Analysis

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

The Agency has established a procedure for conducting thematic analysis and defined the process for selecting topics for thematic analysis and also developed a plan for thematic analysis for the upcoming three years. The thematic analysis currently performed and planned by the Agency can be divided in three parts – thematic analysis on the development of quality assurance system in Latvia, thematic analysis based on the evaluation results, thematic analysis based on specific topics that are important for the higher education society in Latvia.

Thematic analysis on the development of quality assurance system in Latvia

In 2015 the current Deputy Head of the Agency Jolanta Silka developed the Concept of the Development of Latvian Higher Education Quality Improvement. The Concept analysed the possible development of quality assurance system in Latvia based on the systems that had existed previously. In autumn 2015 three staff members of the newly established Agency analysed the compliance of the current system with the ESG. As a result an article “Establishing a national quality assurance agency in the light of ESG 2015” was prepared and submitted for presenting at the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQUAF). In 2017 the article was revised and submitted for publishing in the scientific journal of the Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating of the Republic of Kazakhstan (IAAR).

Thematic analysis based on the assessment results

As it was mentioned in the sub-section 2.3 of this self-evaluation report, the Agency has not yet concluded a full cycle of evaluation procedures therefore there are no such examples on the level of the whole higher education system in Latvia. There is an example of thematic analysis performed after the previous cycle of evaluation procedures (2011 - 2012) by several current staff members of the Agency. In 2017 the Agency performed a survey after the first 12 assessment procedures of study directions conducted between November 2016 and May 2017. The Agency collected feedback on the quality assessment procedures but also used the chance to collect more general information on the necessary changes in legislation and general view of the experts and HEIs on the higher education quality assurance in Latvia. The input was analysed and published in two separate analytical reports - report based on the feedback from the HEIs and report

based on the feedback from the experts. In addition both these reports were summarised in one analytical report, which provides also recommendations for further system improvements. Based on this analysis Agency initiated amendments to the Cabinet regulations in order to improve the procedures for accreditation of study directions and HEI, and licensing of study programmes.

In June 2017 the Chair of CAS and CLSP prof. Tatjana Volkova together with Anita Līce and Arkādijs Zvaigzne – two stakeholder representatives who are extensively involved in the activities of the Agency – elaborated an article “Meeting employers’ expectations on employability competencies of higher education graduates”. The article was based on the feedback received from the representatives of employers who had participated in assessment procedures by the Agency. It examined what kind of employability competencies are highly valued by employers, how employers see their involvement in higher education and what further quality assurance activities should be performed by HEIs to better meet employers’ expectations. The article was presented at the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) in November 2017.

Thematic analysis based on specific topics that are important for the higher education society in Latvia

Since September 2016 the Agency has organised thematic seminars for HEIs covering the different standards of the ESG Part 1, performed surveys for HEIs and also published either summary reports or short thematic reports. The topics covered so far are - student centred learning (ESG 1.4), internal quality assurance systems (ESG 1.1), design, approval, monitoring and revision of study programmes (ESG 1.2, ESG 1.9). As a result of the seminar on student centred learning a national level survey was conducted and a report on the implementation of the student centred learning and best practice is published on the website of the Agency. In summer 2017 the Agency staff member Asnate Kažoka elaborated an article on the role of quality assurance agencies in higher education monitoring on the national level which was presented in “The Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference (FOHE-BPRC3)” in November 2017. The article was prepared in the light of the national higher education monitoring concept in Latvia that is currently being developed. The research was based on the survey of representatives of quality assurance agencies in other countries. In December 2017 the Agency will organise a thematic seminar on information management in higher education institutions (ESG 1.7). The MoES will present the concept for higher education monitoring on the national level and the quality definition developed by stakeholders and the Agency will present the role of a higher education quality assurance agency in higher education monitoring.

Supporting documents:

Plan and procedure for conducting thematic analysis
Concept of the Development of Latvian Higher Education Quality Improvement
Article “Establishing a national quality assurance agency in the light of ESG 2015”
Analytical report. The survey of experts on assessment procedures
Analytical report. The survey of higher education institutions on assessment procedures
Survey of HEI on the implementation of student-centred learning

3.5. Resources

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

Currently in the Agency, there are 11 permanent staff members, 3 staff members responsible for coordinating the ESF project and 1 adviser. The Agency is managed by the Head of the Agency, and, during his absence, the Deputy Head of the Agency undertakes his duties and organises the work of the Agency (see the organisational structure in sub-section 1.3.2.). When Agency was established in 2015, there were 5 employees, including 2 experts (assessment coordinators), IT specialist, Deputy Head and Head of the Agency. Later, because of the increasing workload and the necessity to revise the tasks assigned to each staff member, new positions were created. Since then only one employee has left the Agency. The duties of the staff members are stated in their job descriptions and further specified by annual action plans. The workload of the staff is regularly reviewed and adjusted so that it would allow to perform the activities of the Agency in an efficient way.

The majority of staff is competent and experienced, including experience in quality assurance as assessment experts or policy developers. All employees have at least Master's degree or equivalent qualification, the Head of the Agency has PhD and experience in academic and research work.

At least once a year Deputy Head of the Agency conducts a development interview with every employee in order to identify the needs and areas to be improved. The employees regularly develop their professional skills by attending conferences, seminars and trainings. The remuneration of staff is competitive compared to employees with similar qualification in the similar field.

The financial resources are sufficient for implementing activities and for further development. Currently the funding of the Agency consists of state budget allocation, fees paid in accordance with the price-list, the ESF funding and international projects. Detailed information on financial resources is available in sub-section 1.7.

The information about facilities and material resources can be found in sub-section 1.7. The information on the Agency and assessments is available on the website of AIC and the Agency, whereas the information on the HEIs, study directions and study programmes is available at the Study Direction Register. In addition, it could be mentioned, that Agency is in the process of the development of an information system (e-platform), which will serve both as a publicly accessible portal with information about the higher education system and assessment results as well as internal process management system (including modules for the staff of the Agency, the experts and the CAS and CLSP).

Supporting documentation:

Development of Strategic Directions of the Quality Agency for Higher Education for the period of 2017-2021

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.

The internal quality assurance procedures of the Agency are described in section 1.6. Internal quality assurance of the Agency.

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 Agency's work. 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 of AIC.

The Quality Management Manual describes the Agency's internal quality assurance system, its aim and standards, as well as the management of internal processes.

The Agency's staff and stakeholders were involved in the development of the Quality Management System and its improvement by participating in working groups and meetings, and by monitoring all steps of the quality assessment procedures.

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.

1. Plan (The management process)

Since the Agency has started working in 2015 and the strategic development directions were set for a 5 years period, at this moment the first strategic circle has not yet come to the end. The Agency developed a two steps plan. In the first year the Agency together with stakeholders formulated the Quality Policy and developed strategic plan for the 5 years period. In the years 2 to 5 Agency performs and will perform strategic control and update the plan for managing strategic risks and also, if it is needed, changes could be made to the strategic objectives and strategic plan.

The strategic plan for 5 years was approved by the Council. This is one of the ways how the Agency keeps stakeholders involved in external quality assurance processes and regularly receives recommendations and suggestions for improving the quality of work.

In addition to the Strategic plan, the management of the Agency (after discussions with staff and comments given by the Council) each year creates an annual operational plan which includes the main tasks foreseen for the next year and indicators for improvement of staff qualification/competence. After the first half of the year the management analyses the results and, if it is necessary, makes changes to the Plan.

2. Do (Agency)

At this point all strategic plans, the annual plan and activities come together, the main processes are carried out in compliance with the system of Processes and Measurements and in accordance with the tasks defined in job descriptions. The staff has showed increased interest in their work so the management of the Agency is trying to provide new opportunities for the staff members.

While performing the processes, the staff members can and are encouraged by management to suggest improvements for their daily tasks and the system of processes and measurements can be improved with new descriptions of processes. The staff accumulates the data about process outcomes that are set in the Process and Measurement system. In order to facilitate the work of the staff members and decrease time for performing each procedure diagrams of processes were created.

3. Check (Agency)

The Agency strongly believes that it is crucial that the implementation of the annual plan is monitored on a regular basis and that is why the monitoring of the outcome of Processes and Measurements is done.

During the procedures the assessment coordinators are asked to create a portfolio or documentation package for each procedure and after the procedures has concluded the office manager checks whether the documentation package includes all the necessary information and provides feedback to the assessment coordinator. This is a way how the assessment coordinator can analyse his performance and improve his or her work in the next procedure. This is also a way how the management can understand which are weak points for the staff members and can undertake relevant measures, provide trainings etc.

After the assessment procedures (also seminars) the Agency asks for feedback from the HEIs and experts and, by collecting and analysing the data, understands which parts of procedures should be improved.

In the end of each year the Agency reviews the annual plan and identifies the necessary improvements for the next years plan.

4. Act

Results and activities in this part are based on findings in the other three steps:

- if needed, changes are done in annual and operative plans;
- if needed, the system of Processes and Measurements is updated;
- if needed, corrective and preventive activities are introduced;

In this step the management of the Agency involves the staff and stakeholders by inviting them to working groups and strategic meetings.

Supporting documents:

Code of Ethics

Quality Management Manual Development of Strategic Directions of the Quality Agency for Higher Education for the period of 2017-2021

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.

The Agency has not yet undergone an ENQA external review itself but in its development activities it has addressed all the deficiencies highlighted during the ENQA review of former Latvian quality assurance agency HEQEC (both on the level of the national system and on the level of quality assurance procedures performed by the Agency). After the review coordinated by ENQA, the Agency is also planning to undergo an independent peer review with the aim to follow up on the recommendations formulated by the ENQA review panel and assess the development activities performed in the meantime.

4. INFORMATION AND OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS

The Agency has been regularly collecting and analysing feedback about the conducted accreditation procedures of the study directions and licensing procedures of the study programmes and the capability and readiness of the experts involved in the assessment process. The feedback is collected through an online survey carried out after the decision has been taken by CAS or CLSP. After receiving feedback, the results of the surveys are analysed and improvements are made to the Agency's activities, including the assessment procedures, seminars, trainings. The Agency also gives its feedback about changes which have been made as a result of the comments and suggestions from HEIs.

As it was mentioned in the Introduction part, during the process of the self- evaluation there were discussions with stakeholders, including CAS, CLSP and the Council (members were indicated in sub-section 1.3.2. of this self-evaluation report. After several meetings with stakeholders their suggestions and comments were taken into consideration and report was approved by the chairperson of the AIC Board.

Analysing information which was provided in the meetings with stakeholders and information from HEIs surveys after assessments, the Agency comes to conclusion that there are some areas which stakeholders would like to see in better shape or from another angle, such as provided information about the specific character of the definite study direction to the experts. To overcome this gap or others which could appear in the future (regarding to the necessary information before the visit), the Agency together with LSA is preparing audio – visual material about the accreditation process of the study direction in Latvia.

The biggest dissatisfaction was about distinctive requirements between HEIs self-assessment report and experts report, therefore the Cabinet regulations were amended and the Agency, together with stakeholders developed new guidelines for all evaluation procedures (more detailed information about the guidelines is the sub-section 2.2. of this self- evaluation report).

5. SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE AGENCY

The Agency has performed a comprehensive SWOT exercise during the period of defining the strategy for 2017 - 2021 and designing the internal quality assurance system. The SWOT analysis presented in the self-evaluation report is a summarised and updated version. Each element mentioned in the SWOT analysis is addressed in other parts of the self-evaluation report.

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence and legitimacy of the Agency emphasised by the legislation; • Involvement of Latvian and foreign stakeholders (representatives of employers, students and academic experts) in the activities organised by the Agency and the decision making; • Positive feedback from stakeholders regarding the activities of the Agency; • Positive feedback from experts regarding the assessment procedures and experts training; • Cooperation with MoES regarding strategic issues (as well with other ministries within their competence area) • Systematic cooperation with stakeholders (HEIs, students, employers); • Professional and highly motivated staff; • Internal support system for staff members and flexibility; • Continuous and cyclical activities regarding the expert training, support and development activities for HEI'S; • Public database where assessment results, HEIs self-assessment reports and expert reports are available; • Well composed and wide expert database with clear principles for including experts; • Autonomy in designing the methodology and guidelines for assessment procedures. 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not yet fully functional follow-up system; • Lack of comprehensive examples of thematic analysis; • Insufficiently developed external communication strategy with society; • The expected workload in 2019 due to the exceptionally high number of reaccreditation procedures for study directions; • General criteria for external assessments are stated in Cabinet regulations; • Incomplete historical information about the accreditation procedures of study directions in both languages (Latvian and English); • Lack of eligible Latvian experts in certain areas (due to the small community of professionals and possible conflict of interest); • Insufficient visibility in the international area compared to other agencies.
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in international projects and working groups; • Conducting evaluations of study programmes, study directions (groups of study programmes) and implementing other activities internationally; 	<p>THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible changes in the legislative framework; • Rapid opening of the system to other agencies may endanger the operations of the Agency, without allowing it to accumulate experience;

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attracting and training new experts; • Strengthening the communication and cooperation with stakeholders and society; • Creating an e-platform for electronic process management system • Participation in the development of the higher education quality policy at the national and international level; • Positioning the Agency as the national centre of higher education quality competencies; • Becoming full member of ENQA and listed in EQAR; • Introducing a staff position for public relations specialist. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The members of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council changing irregularly due to their terms in the respective organisation; • Re-election of CAS and CLSP in 2020 when only part of the next cyclical assessments will be implemented. |
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6. CURRENT CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Since AIC has been performing quality assurance functions the role of AIC has increasingly grown up in the higher education area, as it becomes core centre for quality assurance issues, which does not only evaluates the quality, but also performs activities for continuous quality enhancement and quality culture development. It took a time for HEIs and stakeholders to fully comprehend how the new external quality assurance agency works. But after the first few procedures, experts trainings and seminars HEIs started to associate external quality assurance processes with Agency and step by step Agency gains trust of HEIs.

At the same time the involvement of AIC in higher education policy development processes on a national level needs additional human resources. Instead of planning and performing tasks related to quality assurance, there is a necessity to be involved in policy making processes in order to make explanatory work for changeable policy makers.

Nevertheless that Agency was established in 2015, the Agency analyses its implementing activities and received feedback after each assessment procedure, experts training and seminar, therefore the Agency gets all necessary tools to improve its processes and regulations, discusses it with stakeholders and makes it publicly available.

AIKA strategy for 2017 -2021 has defined the Agency's mission and strategic objectives, which were discussed with stakeholders. According to the Strategy and updated SWOT analysis the Agency has identified some areas for further improvement:

1. Regulatory framework of the evaluation process

Due to the national context higher education system is quite arranged by the regulatory enactments. In some cases it burdens the smooth process of evaluation, for example, quality criteria and compliance requirements are assessed together, which cause difficulties to foreign experts, even for Latvian HEIs; the price-list is set by Cabinet regulations, what means that Agency could

not invoice another price if the procedure is organised together with another quality assurance agency; fixed number of days for almost every step in the evaluation process is set in Cabinet regulations. Also there are obstacles regarding different terminology used in Law on HEIs and different Cabinet regulations. The situation was partially solved by amendments to the Cabinet regulations in summer 2017, however it still needs further improvements.

2. Follow-up activities

Although Agency has developed the follow-up procedure, it is not yet fully implemented in practice as there is not enough time spend since the decisions on accreditation. The Agency is planning to implement the follow-up in accordance with established procedure and later on it could be improved based on the analysis.

3. Communication strategy and visibility (national and international)

The Agency is investing a lot of work for developing the quality assurance system in Latvia, by providing clear and in compliance with legislation evaluation procedures, providing consultations to HEIs, organising seminars/conferences/ trainings for HEIs and experts, inviting also foreign experts to share the experience. On the one hand, the Agency communicates and is visible to the academic society, on the other hand, it should become more visible to the society in general. According to the international communication and visibility, it could be mentioned that Agency has been operating only since mid of 2015 and impact of the Agency's international activities and visibility could be measured after the longer period. However, this issue is addressed in the Agency` strategic directions for the next period as well.

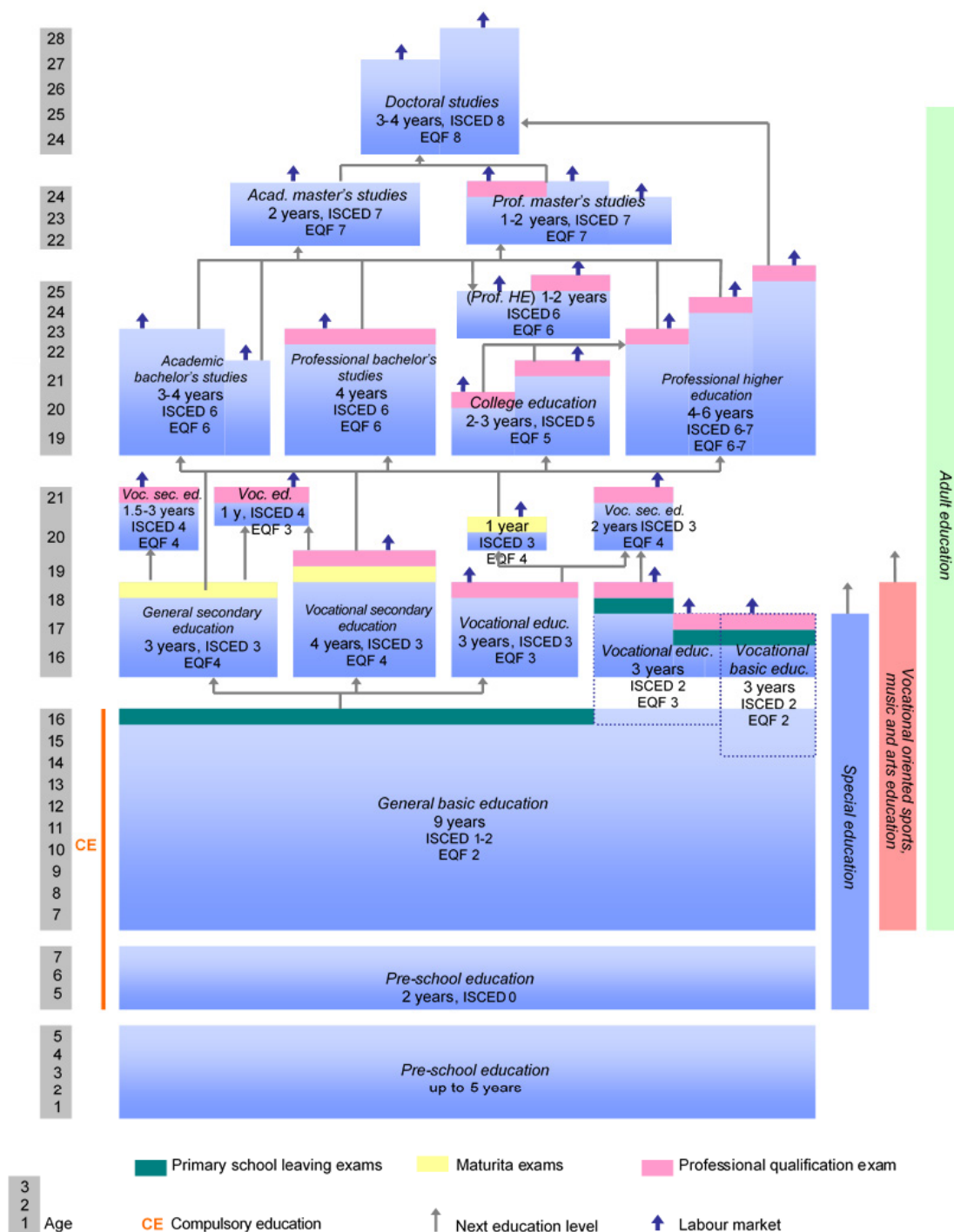
Despite the relatively short duration since the Agency started to operate with quality assurance activities and challenges which the Agency faced, the Agency created new management system, working processes and gained trust from the HEIs and stakeholders. Based on the created management system and gained experience during the performing assessments, training experts etc. the Agency strongly believes that it is possible to overcome most of the mentioned threats and from the point where the Agency is now, take most of the mentioned opportunities.

APPENDIX 1. THE LATVIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The Latvian education system consists of pre-school education, basic education, secondary education and higher education. The table below demonstrates how the Latvian Qualifications Framework (LQF) is aligned with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The LQF is developed on the basis of and taking into account the context and traditions in Latvian education, as well as the stakeholders' interests.

The Latvian Qualifications Framework



Study programmes

Higher education in Latvia comprises both academic and professional study programmes. Most of the HEIs offer both academic and professional higher education study programmes. Academic higher education study programmes are tended to prepared graduates for independent research, as well as to provide theoretical background for professional activities. Academic study programmes are implemented according to the national standard of academic education. They usually comprise a thesis at the end of each stage and lead to a Bachelor's degree or Master's degree. Professional higher education study programmes are tended to provide in-depth knowledge in a particular field, preparing graduates for design or improvement of systems, products and technologies, as well as to prepare them for creative, research and teaching activities in this field. Short-cycle study programmes are implemented according to the national standard for the first level professional higher education whereas the professional bachelor or master study programmes are implemented according to the standard for the second level professional higher education. The professional higher education study programmes lead to a professional qualification and also might lead to a Bachelor's degree or Master's degree.

Different programmes are subject to different legal requirements. In total the duration of professional/vocational study programmes is not less than 4 years after secondary education and not less than 2 years after the first level professional higher education. The duration of the bachelor's programmes may be 3 or 4 years. The total length of full-time bachelor and master studies is not less than 5 years. Doctoral studies last for 3-4 years in full-time studies. The prerequisite for an academic career in Latvia is a doctoral degree or a master's degree.

Latvia still uses its own national credit point system, however it has been aligned with the ECTS and 1 Latvian credit point is generally equivalent to 1.5 ECTS credits. In accordance with this:

- The amount of **first level professional higher education (college) study programme** is 80-120 CP (120-180 ECTS credit points). This programme is basically intended for the acquisition of a profession, but the graduates may continue studies in second level professional higher education programmes;
- The amount of **academic bachelor study programme** is 120-160 Latvian credit points (180-240 ECTS credit points);
- The amount of **academic master study programme** is 80 Latvian credits (120 ECTS credit points);
- The amount of **professional bachelor study programme** is at least 160 Latvian CP (240 ECTS credit points);
- The amount of **professional master study programme** is at least 40 Latvian CP (60 ECTS credit points).

There are several regulated professions, where the content of the study programme is regulated more strictly. Currently, the regulated professions in the Latvian higher education are:

- Architecture (architect);
- Construction (civil engineer, construction work manager);
- Aviation (air traffic controller, flight navigator, pilot, etc.);
- Healthcare (cosmetician, dentist, medical doctor, etc.);
- Education (teacher);

- Law (lawyer);
- Sports (coach, instructor).

In the Latvian higher education system a ten-point grading scale prevails where 10 is the maximum mark and 4 is the lowest passing mark. Explanation of the grading system and the approximate comparison to ECTS grades is given below.

The grading system in Latvia

Achievement level	Marks in tenpoint system	Explanation of the mark	The estimated corresponding ECTS grade
Very high	10	with distinction (izcili)	A
	9	excellent (teicami)	
High	8	very good (ļoti labi)	B
	7	good (labi)	C
Medium	6	almost good (gandrīz labi)	D
	5	satisfactory (viduvēji)	E (lowest passing mark)
	4	almost satisfactory (gandrīz viduvēji)	
Low	3	weak (vāji)	
	2	very weak (ļoti vāji)	
	1	very, very weak (ļoti, ļoti vāji)	

STUDY DIRECTIONS

In Latvia the study programmes are grouped into study directions - thematic groups of study programmes within each HEI. Study direction is also the unit that is assessed during the quality assurance procedures. In total there are 29 study directions, defined by the Cabinet regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions:

Study directions in Latvian higher education

1. Education, pedagogy and sports	2. Arts	3. Religion and theology
4. History and philosophy	5. Language and cultural studies, native language studies and language programmes	6. Translation
7. Psychology	8. Sociology, politics and anthropology	9. Economics
10. Information and communication sciences	11. Management, administration and real estate management	12. Law science

13. Natural sciences	14. Geography and earth sciences	15. Chemistry, chemical technologies and biotechnology
16. Physics, material science, mathematics and statistics	17. Information technology, computer engineering, electronics, telecommunications, computer management and computer science	18. Mechanics and metal working, heat power industry, heat engineering and mechanical engineering.
19. Power industry, electrical engineering and electrical technologies	20. Production and processing	21. Architecture and construction
22. Agriculture, forest management, fishing, veterinary medicine and food hygiene	23. Healthcare	24. Social welfare
25. Hotel and restaurant service, tourism and recreation organisation	26. Transport services	27. Environmental protection
28. Internal security and civil defence	29. Military defence	

Each HEI implements at least one study direction which consists of one or several study programmes. New study directions can be opened only by the decision of the Cabinet of ministers. Currently there are more than 200 study directions with more than 900 corresponding study programmes.

TYPES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN LATVIA

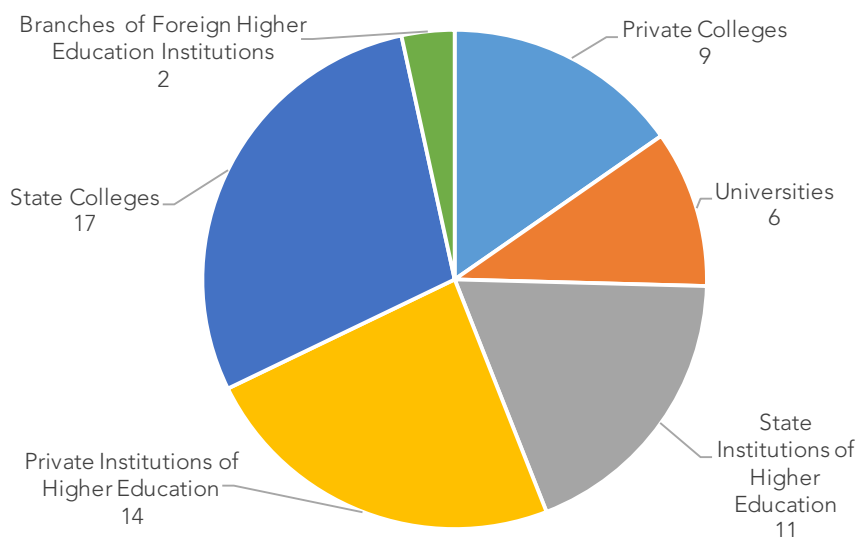
The higher education in Latvia is offered by private and state HEIs. There are two types of HEIs – colleges (koledža) and institutions of higher education (augstskola). The institutions of higher education encompass the universities of applied sciences (augstskolas), academies (akadēmijas) and universities (universitātes). The colleges can only offer first level professional higher education programmes (corresponding to the EQF level 5), whereas the other HEIs could offer higher education on any level – the first level professional higher education, bachelor's, masters and doctoral programmes. The different types of institutions have different requirements for their academic personnel in order to reach their status.

Requirements for different types of HEIs

Latvian Name	English name	EQF/ NQF	% of academic personnel with doctoral degree required	Types of programmes offered
Augstskola	Institution of higher education	5-8	>40%	First level professional higher education programme Professional bachelor's programme
Akadēmija	Academy	5-8	>50%	Professional master's programme Bachelor's programme
Universitāte	University	5-8	>65%	Master's programme Doctoral programme
Koledža	College	5		First level professional higher education programme

Similarly, based on the institution type, whether state or private, there are different requirements and limitations for these institutions. The figure below illustrates the number of different HEIs.

The number of HEIs in Latvia



FUNDING OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION

Latvian higher education is financed by both public and private funding. The state funding is allocated through a number of state budget financed study places allocated directly to the HEIs. The allocation of the state-funded study places is each year decided by the MoES based on discussions with institutions and on the recommendations of the CHE, which involves all stakeholders in higher education. The costs of state-funded study place are prescribed by the Cabinet of Ministers, the base cost for one study place in 2017 is 1458,51 euro, which is then multiplied by the coefficient for each study thematic group and by the study level (x1 for the bachelor's studies, x1.5 for the master's studies and x3 for the doctoral studies).

Not all Latvian HEIs are subordinated to the MoES. The following institutions are subordinated to other ministries that also finance these institutions.

The HEIs not subordinated to the MoES

Institution	The overseeing Ministry
Rīga Stradiņš University Ministry	Ministry of Health
Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music	Ministry of Culture
Latvian Art Academy	
Latvian Academy of Culture	
Latvian University of Agriculture	Ministry of Agriculture
Social Integration State Agency College	Ministry of Welfare
National Defence Academy of Latvia	Ministry of Defence
State Police College	Ministry of the Interior
Fire Safety and Civil Protection College	
State Border Guard College	

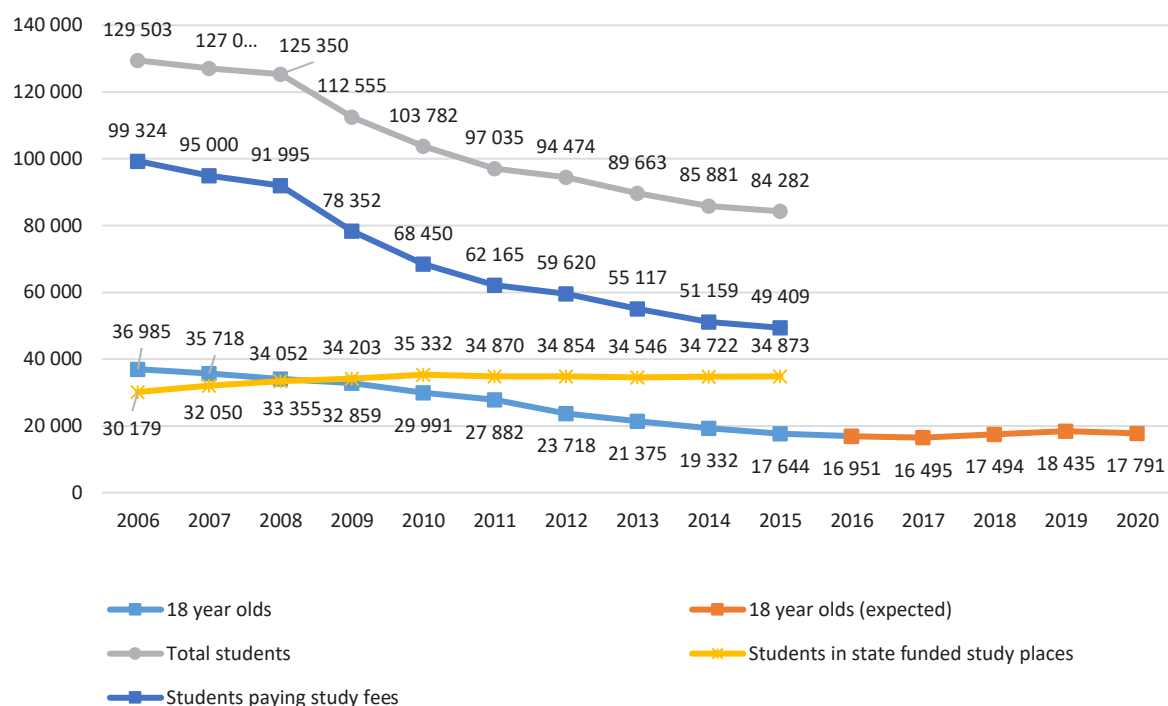
The funding of higher education varies greatly within the system, but the general trend is that state institutions receive state funded study places, whereas private institutions can receive state funded study places, but primarily finance themselves through student fees.

The total funding for higher education in 2015 (according to the MoES data)

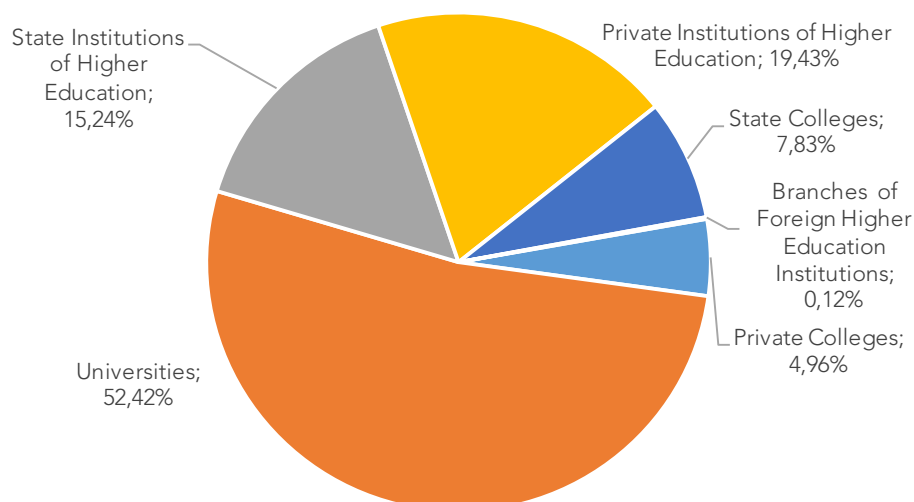
	euro	% of GDP
Total funding for Higher education institutions and colleges, including:	323 729 154	1,3 %
State higher education institutions and college	289 083 927	1,2 %
Private higher education institutions and colleges	34 645 227	0,1 %
Funding sources:		
State budget funding	131 978 257	0,5 %
Private funding	72 699 756	0,3 %
Other sources	119 051 141	0,5 %

As the study places are related with students, it is also important to note that the total number of students and demographic situation in Latvia has been decreasing for the last year.

The demographic situation in Latvia

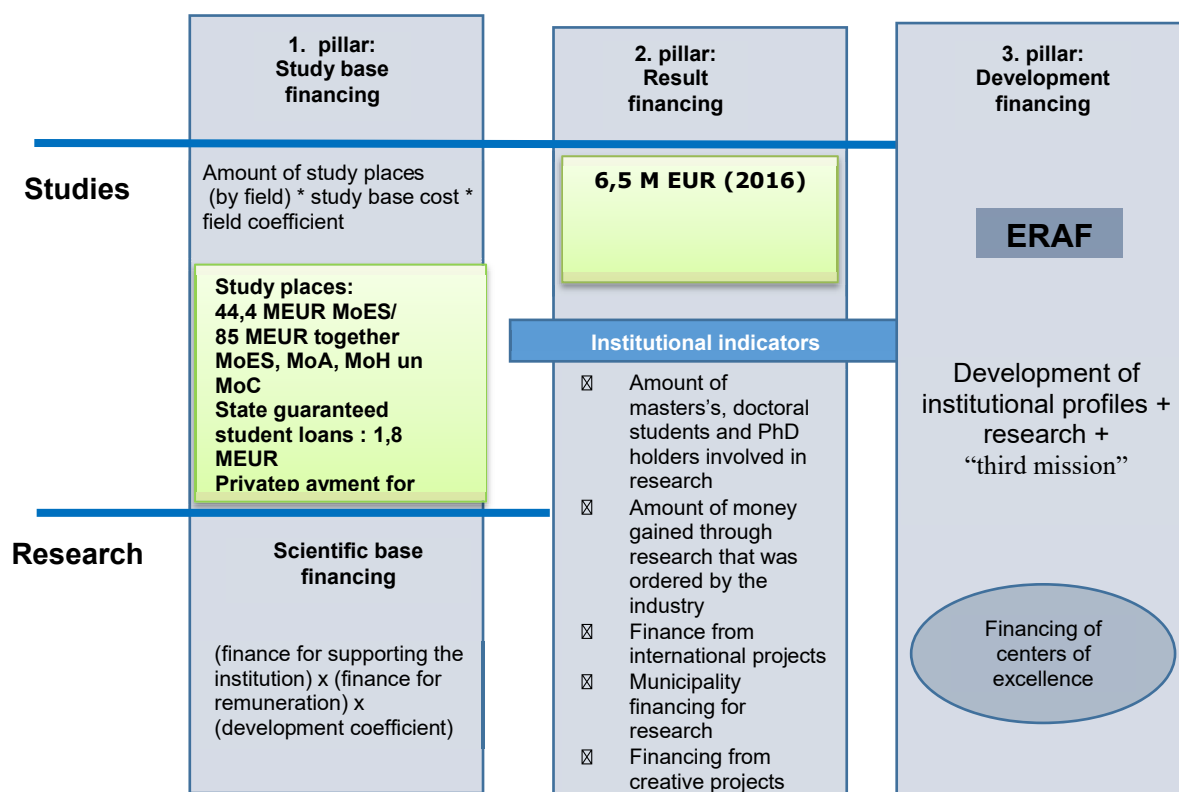


Students by type of higher education institutions in 2015/2016



However, the state funded study places are not the only source of financing offered by the Ministry of Education and Science. The Ministry uses a three pillar model, of which the first and the largest pillar are state funded study places, the second pillar is based on institutional attainment, and the third pillar is based on future values and financed generally through structural funds.

The three pillar model for financing higher education in Latvia



INTERNAL PROCESSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

According to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education, HEIs are autonomous institutions of education and science with the right to self-governance. The autonomy of HEIs shall be characterised by the division of power and responsibility between the State authorities and the management of the HEI, as well as between the management and the academic staff. The autonomy of a HEI shall be expressed in the right to select the ways and forms for the implementation of the tasks set forth by the founders of the HEI, as well as in the responsibility for the quality of education acquired in a HEI, appropriate and efficient utilisation of financial and material resources, and compliance with the democracy principles and with the laws regulating the operation of HEIs and other regulatory enactments.

The principles of governance of HEIs is stated in the Law on Institutions of Higher Education, which specifies the governance of the Latvian HEIs as follows – they are ruled by a constitutional assembly, which decides on the constitution of the HEI as well as elects the rector (who is then confirmed by the Cabinet of Ministers for state institutions), and a senate, which is similar to a constitutional assembly in composition, but rather operates on a day-to-day basis. Both decision-making bodies are by law required to be composed of all types of personnel of the higher education institutions, including at least 20% of students. The students have the right of suspensive veto in both the constitutional assembly and the senate regarding questions that affect students. On the faculty level there are also faculty councils, which decide on aspects related to how the faculty functions. Faculty councils also operate similarly to the aforementioned bodies. These three types of bodies form the “spine” of the HEI, dealing with most of the issues. However, the governance structure for private institutions can be different, as they can operate as a business, delegating much of the senate’s functions to the board. Colleges have a simplified structure – a college council, which acts as the senate and elects the director of the college. Furthermore, the colleges do not have a college constitution, but rather their own college provision.

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF REFERENCES

<i>The title of the document</i>	<i>The document is available in the following language</i>
Laws	
Law on Institutions of Higher Education	LV, ENG
Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers	
Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 407 "Regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions"	LV, ENG
Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 25 July 2017 No.429 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 407 of 14 July 2015 Regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions"	LV, ENG
Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 408 "Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"	LV, ENG
Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 25 July 2017 No.428 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 408 of 14 July 2015 "Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes""	LV, ENG
Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 409 "Price-list of the foundation "Academic Information Centre"".	LV, ENG
Guidelines developed by the Agency	
The guidelines for the preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Study Directions	LV, ENG
The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for study directions	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
Assessment methodologies developed by the Agency	
The Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes (was in force till 20/12/2017)	LV
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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
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The Methodology for Organising Assessment of Changes in Accredited Study Directions (in force from 20/12/2017)	LV
Rules of Procedure	
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	
Annual reports on the activity of the Agency 2015	LV
Annual reports on the activity of the Agency 2016	LV
Other documents	
Follow-up Procedure	LV
Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts	LV
Appeals Procedure	LV
Development of Strategic Directions of the Quality Agency for Higher Education for the period of 2017-2021	LV, ENG
Quality Management Manual	LV, ENG
Guidelines for selection of the Committee for the Accreditation of Studies and Committee for Licensing Study Programmes	LV
Concept of the Development of Latvian Higher Education Quality Improvement	LV
Article "Establishing a national quality assurance agency in the light of ESG 2015"	ENG
Analytical report. The survey of experts on assessment procedures	LV
Analytical report. The survey of higher education institutions on assessment procedures	LV
Documents with restricted access available upon the request from experts	
AIC Statutes	LV
Code of Ethics	LV

To access the documents that are mentioned in the list of references please use the following link
- <http://www.aika.lv/en/agency/legislation/>.





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