SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR THE ENQA AGENCY REVIEW

November, 2022

CONTENT

ABBREVIATIONS

AIC – Academic Information Centre

AIKA – Quality Agency for Higher Education (Agency)

SQC – Study Quality Commission[1]

CHE – Council of Higher Education

Council - Higher Education Quality Assurance Council

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

LDDK – Latvian Employers Confederation

LIZDA – Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees

LSA – Student Union of Latvia

MoES – Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia

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[1] *For information: in the documents there is different translation used - Study Quality Commission, Study Quality Committee or Higher Education Quality Commission, due to the fact that translation is performed differently in official external documents (official translations). However, in Latvian the name is the same "Studiju kvalitātes komisija". The same is referred to the term study direction, which is changed to study field, however in Latvian there are no changes "studiju virziens".*

1. INTRODUCTION

A national quality assurance agency (AIKA – the Agency) operates since 2015 as a structural unit of Academic Information Centre (AIC), which is an independent foundation established in 1994. The Agency was established with aim to facilitate continuous improvement of the external quality assurance system for higher education of Latvia, to promote the quality, visibility and international recognition of higher education in Latvia, covering the entire higher education system of Latvia: state and private higher education institutions and study programmes from short-cycle programmes to doctoral ones.

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 countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that have introduced a quality assurance system and established a quality assurance agency. Since 1990s the quality assurance system has been undergoing continuous changes and developments, and establishment of the Agency in 2015 was a crucial turn point for external quality assurance system of higher education in Latvia.

Agency is serving as a central element between higher education institutions and policy makers in order to ensure that legislative changes are not contradictory with ESG, that they are aimed to improve the quality of higher education at national and international level.

This is the second review of the Agency, therefore this self-assessment report is demonstrating the progress since previous one, the changes of the external assurance system of higher education in Latvia, the further plans and intentions, and the most important – the role of the Agency in the continuously changing environment.

The self-assessment report follows the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews and provides analyses about how the Agency and the quality assurance system of Latvia itself meets the requirements of ESG part 2 and part 3.

The aim of the review is not only to renew ENQA membership of the Agency, but also to renew the listing of the Agency in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which is the prerequisite for being recognised nationally as well.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT

The self-assessment process has been started shortly after the previous assessment was concluded. The Agency took all necessary steps for the implementation of expert panel recommendations, using the opportunity to have progress visit and submitting the follow-up report. Since the previous external evaluation several changes in the regulatory framework in Latvia were introduced. The Agency has followed to the amendments, by expressing its opinion and ensuring that approved changes do not contradict with ESG 2015. Therefore, it could be considered that self-evaluation process of external quality assurance system in Latvia is implemented on a continuous basis.

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

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

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

This is the second ENQA`s external review of the Agency, therefore this report is focused more on the presentation of improvements made, both based on the recommendations given by expert panel in the previous assessment and based on the analyses and feedback given by stakeholders. This task is considered as a great opportunity to review own strengths and weaknesses, and areas for further improvement.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1. Higher education system in Latvia

The higher education system of Latvia consists of college education (short cycle), academic bachelor's studies or professional bachelor's studies (first cycle), academic master's studies or professional master's studies (second cycle) and doctoral studies. The chart below demonstrates how the Latvian Qualifications Framework (LQF) is aligned with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

Figure 1. Chart of higher education system in Latvia[2].
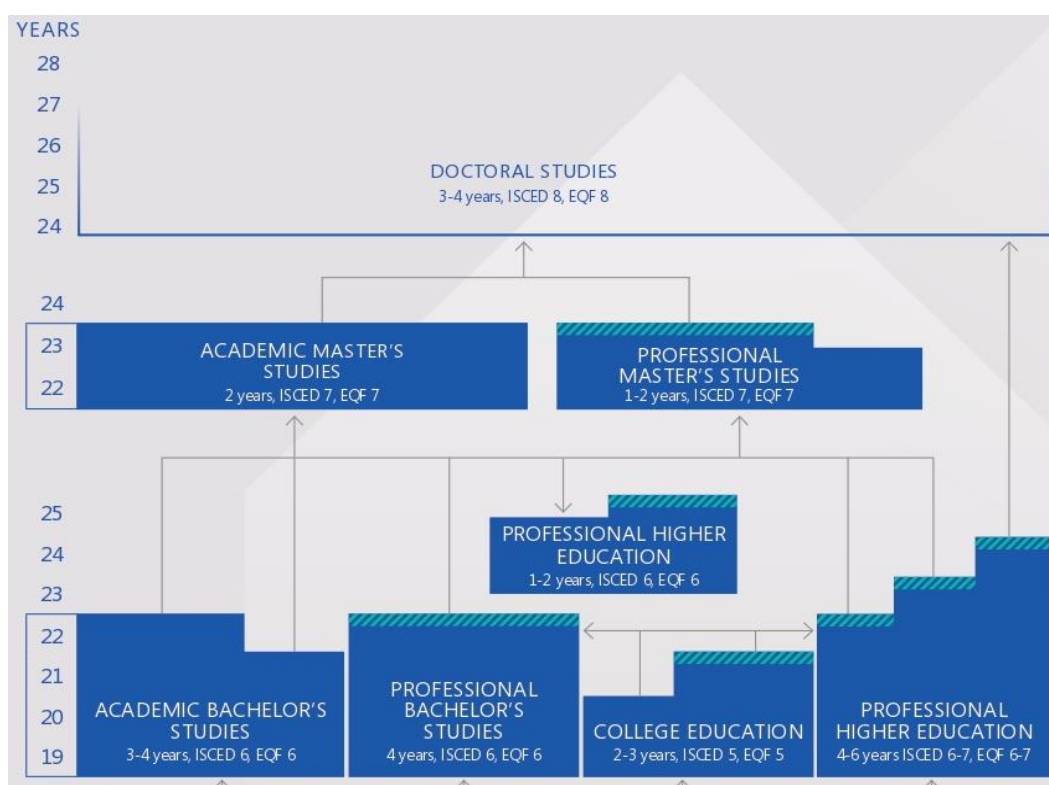
The higher education in Latvia is offered by private and state HEIs. There are two types of HEIs – colleges *(koledžas)* and institutions of higher education *(augstskolas)*. The institutions of higher education include higher education institutions *(augstskolas)*, academies *(akadēmijas)* and universities *(universitātes)*. The colleges can only offer first level professional higher education programmes (short cycle corresponding to the EQF level 5), whereas the other HEIs could offer higher education at any level. However, in 2021 the amendments to the Law in Higher Education Institutions were approved, which set strategic specialisation of HEIs and types such as university of science, university of art and culture, university of applied science, higher education institution *(augstskola)* of applied science (the new typology of HEIs is not yet introduced).

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[2] According to the legislative amendments approved by the Parliament of Latvia in 2022 there are changes in LQF by introducing the same terminology as EQA, instead of using such titles as the first level or second level professional higher education, there will be short cycle, first and second cycle.

Figure 2. Chart of higher education institutions in Latvia[3].

- Universities
- State Higher education institutions
- State Colleges
- Agencies of state Universities and Higher education institutions
- Private Higher education institutions
- Private Colleges
- Branches of foreign Universities
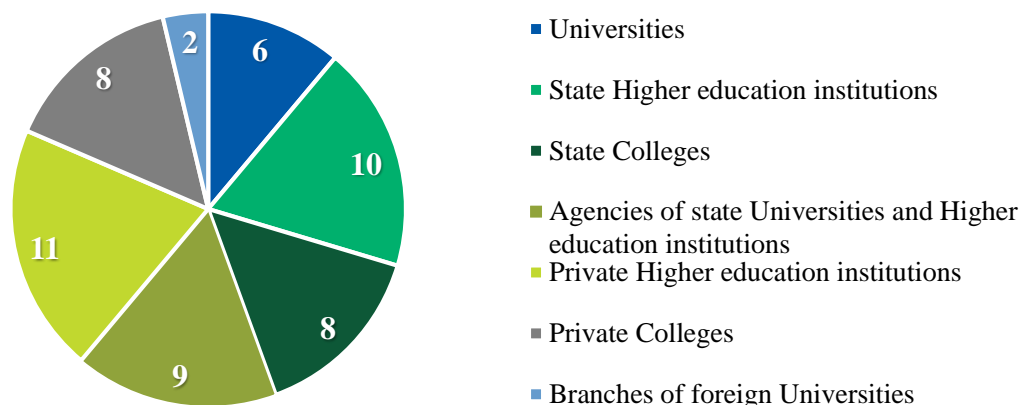
In Latvia all study programmes are grouped into study fields – thematic groups of study programmes within each HEI. Study field is also the unit that is assessed during the quality assurance procedure – assessment and accreditation of study field. Each HEI implements at least one study field which consists of one or several study programmes. In total there are 32 study fields, defined by the Cabinet of Ministers (the Cabinet) regulations[4] on opening and accreditation of study fields:

Table 1. List of study fields in Latvia

1. Education and pedagogy
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 sciences
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. Mechanic and metal working, heat power industry, heat engineering and mechanical engineering
19. Power industry, electrical technologies
20. Production and processing
21. Architecture and construction
22. Agriculture, forest management, fishing and food hygiene
23. Health care
24. Social welfare
25. Hotel and restaurant service, tourism and recreation organization
26. Environment protection
27. Transport services
28. Internal security and civil defence
29. Military defence
30. Veterinary medicine
31. Sport
32. Maritime education

Higher education in Latvia comprises of academic and professional study programmes. Academic higher education study programmes prepare graduates for independent research, as well as theoretical background for professional activities. Academic study programme is regulated by national education

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[3] Overview of higher education in Latvia in 2020. Only in Latvian. https://www.viis.gov.lv/sites/default/files/2021-12/parskats_par_latvijas_augstako_izglitibu_2020.pdf

[4] Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 11 December 2018 No. 793 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields"

standard and after graduation a Bachelor's degree or Master's degree is awarded. Professional higher education study programmes provide in-depth knowledge in a particular field, preparing graduates for design or improvement of systems, products and technologies, as well as prepare them for creative, research and teaching activities in this field. After graduation a professional Bachelor's degree or professional Master's degree and/or professional qualification is awarded. Each type of study programmes is regulated by national education standard. 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. In total there are 984 study programmes in Latvia.

Figure 3. Chart of study programmes in Latvia[5].
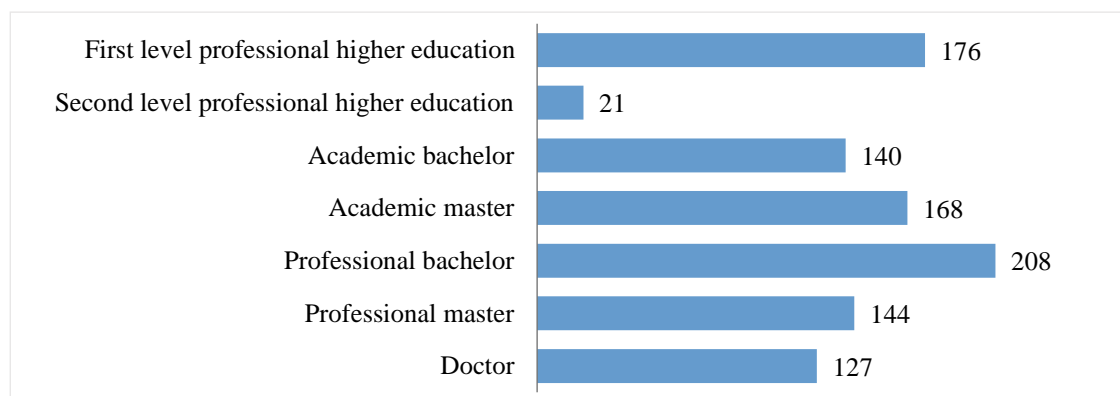
There are several regulated professions, where professional qualification requirements are set. Currently, the regulated professions[6] in the higher education in Latvia are:

- Architecture (architect)
- Circulation of explosives for civil purposes (explosive manager)
- Circulation of pyrotechnics (pyrotechnician)
- Construction (civil engineer, construction work manager)
- Detective work and security work (security guard, detective)
- Education and sport (teacher, sport coach)
- Electrical energy (electrical equipment specialist, electrical engineer)
- Energy efficiency (building energy efficiency expert)
- Healthcare (medical doctor, dentist, pharmacist etc.)
- Law (lawyer)
- Psychology (phycologist)
- Real estate (surveyor, real estate appraiser)
- Species and habitat protection
- Transport (ship mechanic, ship captain etc.)
- Veterinary medicine (veterinarian)

There is still national credit point system in place – 1 Latvian credit point is equivalent to 1.5 ECTS credits. However, in 2022 amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions were approved and by the end of 2024 the workload will be expressed in ECTS only.

Higher education in Latvia is financed both by public and private funding. The state funding is granted directly to the HEI. The funding of higher education varies within the system, but mainly

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[5] Data provided in E-platform, https://eplatforma.aika.lv/
[6] On the Regulated Professions and the Recognition of Professional Qualifications

state institutions receive state funded study places, whereas private institutions can receive state funded study places in specific case only and are primarily financed through student fees.

Table 2. The number of students and funding for higher education in 2021[7].

	Number of students	Funding	Funding % of total revenue
Total	**77 376**	**€ 284 748 969**	**62,2%**
State higher education institutions and colleges	59 612	€ 258 627 720	56,5%
Private higher education institutions and colleges	17 764	€ 26 121 249	5,7%
Funding sources:			
State budget funding	32 077	€ 171 966 341	37,6%
Private funding	45 299	€ 95 729 734	20,9%

3.2. Legal framework

First of all, higher education in Latvia is regulated by the following laws:

- ***Education law*** (1998) – the main law that includes definitions for all types and levels of education and determine general principles and sets general principles for institutions.
- ***Vocational Education Law*** (1999) – the purpose of the law is to ensure the implementation of the state professional education policy, as well as the operation, management and development of the professional education system.
- ***Law on Higher Education Institutions*** (1995) – applies to all HEIs in Latvia, regulates the legal basis of the HEIs, determines and protects the autonomy of HEIs.
- ***Law on Scientific Activities*** (2005) – determines the unity of science and higher education, the rights of scientists, responsibility, independence and academic freedom, professional and social guarantees, the competence and obligations of state institutions in ensuring scientific activity.

Secondly, higher education in Latvia is regulated by several Cabinet regulations:

- ***Regulation on the classification of education in Latvia*** (2017) – determines the classification of education in Latvia, including descriptions of knowledge, skills and competences corresponding to the levels of the LQF, which is also used to formulate degrees for academic study programmes.
- ***Regulation on groups of science branches, scientific branches and sub-branches*** (2022) – classifies science branches and is also used to formulate doctorate degrees.
- ***Regulation on the national standard of academic education*** (2014) – determines the general principles for academic bachelor and master study programmes, as well as main principles for learning and grading in academic study programmes.
- ***Regulations on the national standard of first-level professional higher education*** (2001) – determines the general principles for first-level professional study programmes including strategic goals, mandatory content and grading principles.

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[7] Statistics on higher education. 2020-2021. Only in Latvian. https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/statistika-par-augstako-izglitibu Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Statistical data about students. https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/education/higher-education/8097-students

Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Enrolment in higher education institutions and colleges by type of financing of tuition and education thematic group (at the beginning of school year) 1992 – 2021. https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_PUB/START__IZG__IG__IGA/IGA020/

- ***Regulations on the national standard of second-level professional higher education*** (2014) – determines the general principles for professional bachelor and master study programmes including strategic goals and main tasks, mandatory content and grading principles.
- ***Procedure and criteria for awarding of doctorate degree*** (2005) – determines the general principles for doctoral theses, promotion council, evaluation of the doctoral thesis, defence of the doctoral thesis and awarding of the doctoral degree.

3.3. Quality assurance in the context of Agency

The Agency is the only independent and recognised higher education quality assurance institution in Latvia. The Agency was established with the aim of improving the external quality assurance system of higher education in Latvia and promoting the quality, visibility and international recognition of higher education of Latvia. Since the establishment of the Agency in 2015, it carries out the following responsibilities and functions:

- Ensuring the assessment and accreditation in higher education.
- Ensuring the quality monitoring and improvement of study fields.
- Performing the analysis at the system level, carry out research, participate in the projects related to external quality assurance matters.
- Informing society about assessment results.
- Providing the necessary information and support for HEIs and other stakeholders.
- Developing procedures and guidelines for ensuring the functions of the Agency.
- Participating in international networks for external quality assurance.

National legislation defines the types of external assessment procedures, but the Agency has independence and autonomy to elaborate methodologies, guidelines and criteria. All external assessment procedures are mandatory for higher education institutions nevertheless their type and status (private or state). The Agency is authorised to conduct all types of external assessment procedures.

In addition, it could be mentioned that assessment of the study field can also be carried out by another quality assurance agency included in the EQAR by choice of the HEIs, but in any case, the decision on the accreditation of the study field is made by the Study Quality Commission (SQC).

The Agency has established good collaboration with all stakeholders and has regular communication. As a result of intensive discussions with stakeholders, it is planned that from 2025 the external quality assessment system will be switched to institutional accreditation. This transition has several positive impacts, for example, it will allow to evaluate and review the whole quality assurance system, it will facilitate trust and quality culture development and moreover it will strengthen the autonomy and responsibility of higher education institutions.

4. HISTORY, PROFILE AND ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY

4.1 History 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 quality assurance agency of Latvia - Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (HEQEC) was established in 1994 in collaboration with the MoES 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. The decisions on the accreditation higher education institutions were taken by the Council of Higher Education (CHE), but the decisions to accredit study programmes were taken by the Accreditation Committee for Higher Education Programmes, approved by the Minister for Education and Science.

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 (ESG), but the outcome was negative as it was concluded that the HEQEC did not fully comply with all requirements. The negative assessment was one of the reasons for the changes in the external quality assessment system.

Between 2010 and 2012 the CHE carried out the project of study programmes evaluation within the framework of the European Social Fund (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 fields for the purpose of accreditation, it was decided to use the results of the ESF project for the accreditation of study fields, therefore the transition from accreditation of study programmes to the accreditation of study fields was confirmed.

CHE consists of 13 members approved by the Parliament based on the proposal of the Minister for Education and Science. The term of all member of CHE is four years, except the student member whose term is two years. The competence, establishment ad tasks of CHE are set in the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

In 2012 the MoES 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 fields 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 fields and on licensing of study programmes were taken by the Committee for the Accreditation of Studies and the Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes, respectively, which was approved by the Minister for Education and Science.

Being aware of the need to establish a national quality assurance body that would operate in accordance with the ESG and promote the quality of higher education, its visibility, and international recognition, the MoES, in collaboration with stakeholders, developed the Concept of the Development of Latvian Higher Education Quality Improvement (approved by the Cabinet Decree No. 640 of 3 November 2014). The concept put forward the proposal to delegate AIC the quality assurance functions which are performed by a structural unit. As a result, after the amendments to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education and the adoption respective regulations of the Cabinet the AIC became the institution responsible for quality assurance in higher education.

4.2. Status and Organisational Structure of the Agency

The Quality Agency for Higher Education (Agency) was established in March 2015 as the structural unit - Accreditation department - within the Academic Information Centre (AIC). AIC is a public non-profit foundation established in 1994 with the aim to perform functions and tasks, authorised by the Laws and Cabinet regulations, related to recognition and transparency tools (set on the legislative level and also by an agreement between AIC and MoES).

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 representative of Latvia 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 Europass Centre – organises the implementation and the promotion of Europass documents (i.e. Europass CV, Europass Mobility, Europass Diploma Supplement, and Europass Certificate Supplement) (since 2005);
- National Coordination Point for referencing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the EQF (since 2008);
- ***National Quality Agency for Higher Education (since 2015)***

In order to perform quality assurance functions AIC established a separate department: Accreditation department named "Quality Agency for Higher Education (AIKA)". In order to emphasize and distinguish the quality assurance functions of the department, it was named "Quality Agency for Higher Education" (AIKA). The main task of the Agency is to organise the accreditation of higher education institutions, colleges, study fields (study programme groups), licensing of study programmes, as well as the implementation of other tasks related to the quality assurance of higher education

The Agency started to work at a full capacity on the 1 July 2015, when the amendments to the Law on HEIs came into force. After the amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institution came into force (1 July 2015), the corresponding the Cabinet regulations were elaborated and introduced:

- Cabinet Regulation of 14 July 2015 No. 407 "Regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Fields", which was replaced by other regulation approved on 11 December 2018: No. 793 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields" and No. 794 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Colleges"
- Cabinet Regulation of 14 July 2015 No. 408 "Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes", which was replaced by other regulation approved on 11 December 2018: No. 795 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"

According to the Law on HEIs a higher education institution or college is entitled to issue State-recognised 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 Parliament (*Saeima*) or accordingly by the Cabinet.

Figure 4. Chart of the organisational structure of the Agency.
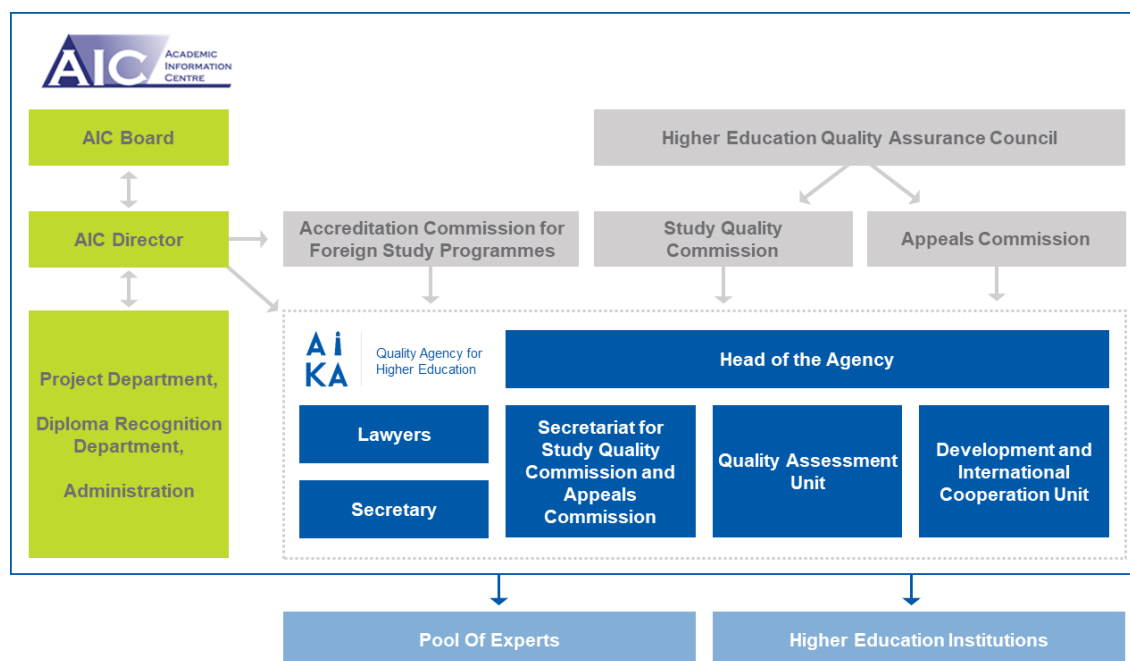
The Agency is supervised by the **Higher Education Quality Assurance Council** (Council), which comprises 8 members representing different stakeholder organisations. The first Council was approved in 2015 for a period of five years. However, due to the new Cabinet regulation[8] in 2019 the new composition of Council was approved. The organisation of work, tasks, composition, 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 are prescribed by the Rules of Procedure[9].

The Council approves the composition of the SQC, its chairperson and deputy chairperson, as well as the rules of procedure of the SQC. The composition of Appeals Commission is also approved by the Council. In addition, Council is involved in strategic issues of the Agency by setting strategic directions for development.

SQC is a collegial decision-making body, established for the purpose to take a decision on the licensing of a study programme, accreditation of a study field, approval of changes in a study field and relevant study programmes and inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of a study field. In 2019 due to the legislative amendments the new SQC was approved by the

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[8] Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 408 "Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes" was replaced by other regulation approved on 11 December 2018 No. 795 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"

[9] Rules of Procedure of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rules-of-Procedure-of-the-Higher-Education-Quality-Assurance-Council.pdf

Council for a five-year term (in 2021 one member was replaced for a fixed term). In accordance with respective Cabinet regulations SQC is comprised of seven members, who shall have experience in:

- higher education quality assessment;
- organisation of the study process in higher education;
- the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process) and other international processes in higher education
- organisation and facilitation of cooperation between the higher education and labour market, scientific research and artistic creation.

The composition of SQC is presented on the Agency website[10]. The tasks, organisation of work and decision-making process is prescribed in the Rules of procedure[11] approved by the Council in 2019.

Appeals Commission is a collegial decision-making body, established for the purpose to review the applications for contesting the decisions of the SQC and take decisions according to the procedure set in the Administrative Procedure Law. In 2022 the composition of Appeals Commission was approved by the Council. The composition of this commission is presented on the Agency website[12]. The tasks, organisation of work and decision-making process is prescribed in the Rules of procedure[13] approved in 2022.

The Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes is a collegial decision-making body, established for the purpose to take decisions on the accreditation of study programmes of foreign higher education institutions abroad. It was established in December 2020 and its composition is available on the Agency website[14]. The tasks, organisation of work and decision-making process is prescribed in the Rules of procedure[15] approved in 2020.

As demonstrated in the chart above, the Agency is managed by the Head of the Agency. In 2019 there were changes in the organisational structure of the Agency. As a result, the management of the Agency consists of the Head of Agency, Head of Quality Assessment Unit and Head of Development and International Cooperation Unit. During the period 2016 – 2019 the ESF project" "The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency", No. 8.2.4.0/15/I/001 was implemented and a project team (three employees) was responsible for administrating the project and coordinating the project activities in cooperation with all of the Agency staff. Currently there are 18 staff members in the Agency.

4.3. 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 higher education of Latvia, which would operate in accordance with the ESG and promote the quality, visibility and international recognition of the higher education of Latvia, covering the entire higher education system of Latvia: state and private HEIs and the study programmes starting from short-cycle programmes to doctoral ones.

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[10] Study Quality Commission. https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/study-quality-committee/
[11] Rules of the Study Quality Committee. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Rules-of-the-Study-Quality-Committee.pdf
[12] Appeals Commission. https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/appeals-committee/
[13] Rules of the Appeals Committee.
https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Apelacijas_komisijas_nolikums.pdf (in Latvian)
[14] Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes. https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/accreditation-commission-for-foreign-study-programmes/
[15] Regulations of the Accreditation Commission of Foreign Study Programmes. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ASPAK_reglaments_30112020.pdf (in Latvian)

Vision:

Quality assurance agency for higher education is trustful and internationally recognized, it contributes to the continuous quality enhancement of higher education in Latvia and takes active role in quality assurance processes of the European and global higher education area.

Mission:

- promotes the improvement of quality of higher education of Latvia and contributes to the development of quality culture and its maintenance in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area;
- carries out the expertise and provides reliable information on higher education quality assessment and development/improvement issues;
- it is a credible partner of 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 are based on effective cooperation in quality assurance in higher education with stakeholders at local and international level.

For the period 2017-2022, the Agency's key strategic objectives are as follows:

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

The main functions of the Agency:

1. Ensure the accreditation of HEIs and study fields, as well as licensing of study programmes, assessment of substantial changes in the study fields and inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accredited study field, that also includes:
   - developing and adhering to the external quality assessment methodologies and procedures which comply with the ESG;
   - organising the work of expert groups for each assessment procedure, 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 ensuring the compliance with the Cabinet regulations;
- selection and approving the composition of the experts' groups for each assessment procedure;
- 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 SQC, Appeals Commission, Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes and for assessment experts;
- ensuring the documentation and archiving of the assessment process;
- organising the meetings of the Council, SQC, Appeals Commission, Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes;
- working out the assessment methodology for each assessment procedure;
- 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 fields that also includes:
- implementing follow-up activities in order to monitor the implementation of recommendations and proposals provided by assessment 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 (E-platform) about the assessment results;
- at the beginning of each year, publishing on the Agency's website a list of study fields, 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 fields 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.

4.4. Quality Assessment Activities

Currently there are three main external quality assurance procedures performed the Agency in Latvia – accreditation of HEI, accreditation and assessment of study field and licensing of study programme. In addition, there are two technical procedures such as – an assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes) and inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field. In order to promote services of the Agency abroad, the accreditation of study programmes abroad was introduced in 2020.

The 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.

For each assessment procedure there is defined methodology and guidelines, providing a clear subject matter, the scope and outcomes.

Here is an overview of all procedures conducted by the Agency:

Type of Assessment	Organisation	Experts	Decision-making body	Comments
Licensing of study programme	Agency	**3 experts** (academician, student, labour market)	Study Quality Commission	Mandatory procedure based on ESG
Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field	Agency	**2 experts** (field experts – 1 local and 1 foreign)	Study Quality Commission	Temporary procedure covering ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation and assessment of study field
Accreditation and assessment of study field	Agency	**At least 5 experts** (academician, student, labour market, in all cases at least 2 foreign experts)	Study Quality Commission	Mandatory procedure based on ESG
	Other EQAR agency			
	Agency + other EQAR agency			
Assessment of feasibility o changes in study	Agency	**1 expert** (field expert)	Study Quality Commission	Technical procedure covering ESG Part 2 only in combination with another related procedure – licensing

fields (i.e.study programmes)				of study programme or accreditation and assessment of study field
Accreditation of HEI	Agency	**7 experts** (academician, student, labour market, in all cases at least 2 foreign experts)	Council of Higher Education Due to the legislative changes from 2025 Study Quality Commission	Mandatory procedure only for newly established HEI, based on ESG. At the moment, all HEIs in Latvia are accredited for indefinite period, therefore this procedure is not applicable
Accreditation of study programmes abroad	Agency	**At least 4 experts** (academician, student, labour market)	Accreditation Commission for foreign study programmes	Procedure for foreign HEIs operating abroad, based on ESG

In its assessment procedures, the Agency adheres to the following phases stipulated by the ESG which are described in detail also in the later chapters:

1. Self-evaluation
2. Site visit with external experts
3. Final report
4. Decision-making
5. Publication of outcomes
6. Follow-up

During the period 2018 to October 2022 the Agency has conducted all types of assessment procedures at national level. The total number of decisions made on assessment procedures during the period is 377. In addition, one assessment procedure for institutional accreditation was conducted.

Table 3. Completed procedures in 2018 – 2022 at national level.

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

Regarding accreditation of study programmes abroad in 2020 eight and in 2021 seven study programmes were evaluated and accredited.

4.4.1. Accreditation of HEI

Accreditation of a 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 is entitled to 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. Up to date all HEIs in Latvia are accredited.

During the evaluation of a HEI several criteria are evaluated:

1) aims and objectives of the HEI or college, its management structure;
2) Internal quality assurance system;
3) Resources;
4) Teaching staff;
5) Scientific research or artistic creation;
6) Cooperation and internationalisation;
7) Activities of students' self-governance;
8) Compliance of the activities of the higher education institution/ college with the provisions of regulatory enactments.

HEI makes self-assessment and submits self-assessment report following the guidelines for preparing the self-assessment of HEI[16]. An assessment expert group prepares their assessment report following guidelines for preparing the joint report of the experts' group for assessment of HEI[17]. During procedure, all involved parties follow the procedural steps stated in Methodology for Organising the Assessment of Higher Education Institutions and Colleges[18]. The process of accreditation of HEI takes up to six months after the HEI application is received till the decision is taken by the CHE.

Within the reporting period, this procedure was applied to one college, which resulted in the decision to grant accreditation. Therefore, up to date all HEIs in Latvia are accredited.

Considering that currently all HEIs in Latvia have obtained accreditation, as well as analysing the future possible directions for development of external quality assessment, the Agency has initiated discussions on the change of the external quality assessment model, assuming that in the future institutional accreditation could be the main cyclical assessment procedure.

The first discussions were held at the end of 2019 when the Agency started discussions with cooperation partners and representatives of HEIs about the accreditation of higher education institutions in Latvia – possibilities and prerequisites. Discussions were followed by involvement in the MoES project "RoadMap for Implementation of Institutional Assessment in Latvia" Funded by European Union ERASMUS + K3 program "Support for policy reforms (Number 899137 – RoadMap). Within the framework of the project, the cycle of discussions with cooperation partners was continued. In addition, during the project it was possible to acknowledge good practice from other countries (for example, Sweden, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary and Austria), as a result of the project a conceptual report has been developed, including possible scenarios for the transition to institutional accreditation.

Transition to the institutional accreditation as the main cyclical external quality assurance procedure is supported by all stakeholders, including HEIs and policy makers. In 2022 amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions were approved which indicate that starting from 2025 the decision-making body for accreditation of HEIs will be SQC (instead of Council of Higher Education), therefore assessment and accreditation of HEIs will be under the competence of the Agency solely.

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[16] The Guidelines for the Preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Higher Education Institutions/ Colleges: http://aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-a-Self-Assessment-Report-of-Higher-Education-Institutions_Colleges.pdf

[17] The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Opinion by the Experts Group on the Assessment of the Higher Education Institutions/ Colleges: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-the-Joint-Opinion-by-the-Experts-Group-on-the-Assessment-of-the-HEI.pdf

[18] Methodology for Organising the Assessment of Higher Education Institutions and Colleges: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Methodology-for-Organising-the-Assessment-of-Higher-Education-Institutions-and-Colleges.pdf

The following actions are planned for transition to the institutional accreditation:

- Approval of the conceptual report by the Cabinet
- Development and harmonisation of regulatory framework
- Development of new methodologies and guidelines
- Work on adapting the E-platform
- Seminars for HEIs on institutional accreditation
- Attracting new evaluation experts and training of experts
- Procedure piloting and testing in the E-platform
- First applications from HEIs for institutional accreditation.

4.4.2. Licensing of a Study Programme

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

Licensing is prescribed in the Cabinet regulation No. 795 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes"[19]. The methodology, criteria and guidelines are developed by the Agency in cooperation with relevant stakeholders:

- Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes[20];
- The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Description of a Study Programme[21];
- The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Report by the Experts on the Assessment of a Study Programme[22]

The new study programme is evaluated by three experts – an academic expert in the relevant field, a representative from the Latvian Employers' Confederation (LDDK) and a representative from the Latvian Student Union (LSA).

During the licensing procedure it is reviewed whether:

- a study programme is compliant with requirements of regulatory acts;
- qualification of the academic staff;
- material and technical base;
- content and implementation mechanism;
- a study programme is included in the relevant study field.

The process of licensing takes up to four months after the HEI application is received till the decision is taken by SQC (Figure 5).

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[19] Cabinet regulation No. 795 "Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes", 11 December 2018: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303957-regulations-regarding-licensing-of-study-programmes
[20] Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Methodology-for-Organising-Licensing-of-Study-Programmes-amended-08.12.2020..pdf
[21] The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Description of a Study Programme: http://aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-the-Description-of-a-Study-Programme.pdf
[22] The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Report by the Experts on the Assessment of a Study Programme: http://aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-the-Joint-Report-by-the-Experts-on-the-Assessment-of-a-Study-Programme.pdf

Figure 5. The steps of licensing of a study programme.

Licensing of a study programme	7. The experts group drafts the joint report wich is reviewed by Agency and sent to HEI	8. The Agency submits the joint report and other documentation for decision making
1. Decision by Senate/ Council of HEI regarding establishment of a new study programme	6. Assessment visit	9. Study Quality Commission makes a decision
2. HEI submits the application and self-assesment report to the Agency	5. The experts group participates in experts training	10. The experts report and outcomes are published
3. The Agency examines the application and documents attached	4. The experts group is approved	11. Follow-up activities

4.4.3. Accreditation and Assessment of Study Field

Accreditation and assessment of study field – assessment with the purpose of determining the quality of the resources of HEI and the ability to implement a study programme corresponding to a specific study field in accordance with regulatory enactments. In addition, its purpose is to identify areas for further improvements and assist the HEI in developing quality culture.

The accreditation of the study field gives the right to issue a state-recognised diploma of higher education for successful acquisition of a study programme corresponding to the relevant study field. Assessment of a study field is an integral part of the accreditation (i.e. decision-making part) of a study field. Decision on the accreditation of study field is taken by the SQC. Study field 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 field) or 0 years (negative decision).

The study fields and the accreditation procedure are defined by the Cabinet Regulation of 11 December 2018 No. 793 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields"[23].

Currently in Latvia there are 32 different study fields in higher education. According to the legislation the study field accreditation shall take place every six year. The first accreditation of study fields took place in 2013, thus the recurring accreditation ought to be carried out in 2019. However, due to large number of study fields, as well as because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government evened out and extended twice the validity of the first accreditation, thus the reoccurring accreditation process of all study fields now is spread between years 2019 and 2024.

For organizing a smoother and efficient accreditation process, the Agency has developed the following set of documents in accordance with Regulation No. 793:

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[23] Cabinet regulations No. 793 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields", 11 December 2018: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303956-regulations-regarding-opening-and-accreditation-of-study-fields

- Methodology for the Assessment and Accreditation of Study Fields[24];
- The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Self-Assessment Report of a Study Field[25];
- The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Opinion by the Expert Group on the Assessment of a Study field[26]

The accreditation and assessment procedure consist of two stages –the assessment stage and the actual accreditation, i.e. decision making, stage:
- the assessment stage takes six months after the HEI application is received and during this stage the joint opinion of the external expert group is developed;
- the accreditation, i.e. decision making, stage takes four months since application and during this stage HEI submits plan on implementation of recommendations that stems from the expert joint opinion and information on the changes (if any programme parameters are changed) of the study programmes that are included in the study field.

The HEI may choose to opt for any EQAR listed agency to undergo the assessment stage, but the decision-making stage is carried out in the Agency by SQC. So far, all HEIs have chosen the Agency for the assessment stage.

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

As the study field consists of several study programmes, there are some additional aspects which are reviewed separately for each study programme:
1) the reciprocal compliance between the name of the study programme, the degree to be acquired, professional qualification or degree and professional qualification, aims and objectives, and terms of admission;
2) the curricula;
3) compliance of the qualification of the academic staff with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the requirements set out in the regulatory enactments;
4) resources and provisions specific to the study programme;

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[24] Methodology for the Assessment and Accreditation of Study Fields: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Methodology-for-the-Assessment-and-Accreditation-of-Study-Fields-amended-08.12.2020..pdf

[25] The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Self-Assessment Report of a Study Field, approved on 04.03.2019, amended on 16.01.2020 and on 20.08.2021, http://aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-the-Self-Assessment-Report-of-a-Study-Direction.pdf

[26] The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Opinion by the Expert Group on the Assessment of a Study field, approved on 04.03.2019, amended on 20.08.2021, https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TULKOJUMS_SVN_Ekspertu-atzinuma-vadl%C4%ABnijas_07022022_clean.pdf.

5) employment perspectives of the graduates of the study programme.

The study field is evaluated by at least five experts – an academic expert in the relevant field, including international experts, a representative from LDDK and a representative from LSA. Number of experts in the expert group depends on the number of study programmes in the study field under assessment, in addition there are always at least two international (foreign) experts.

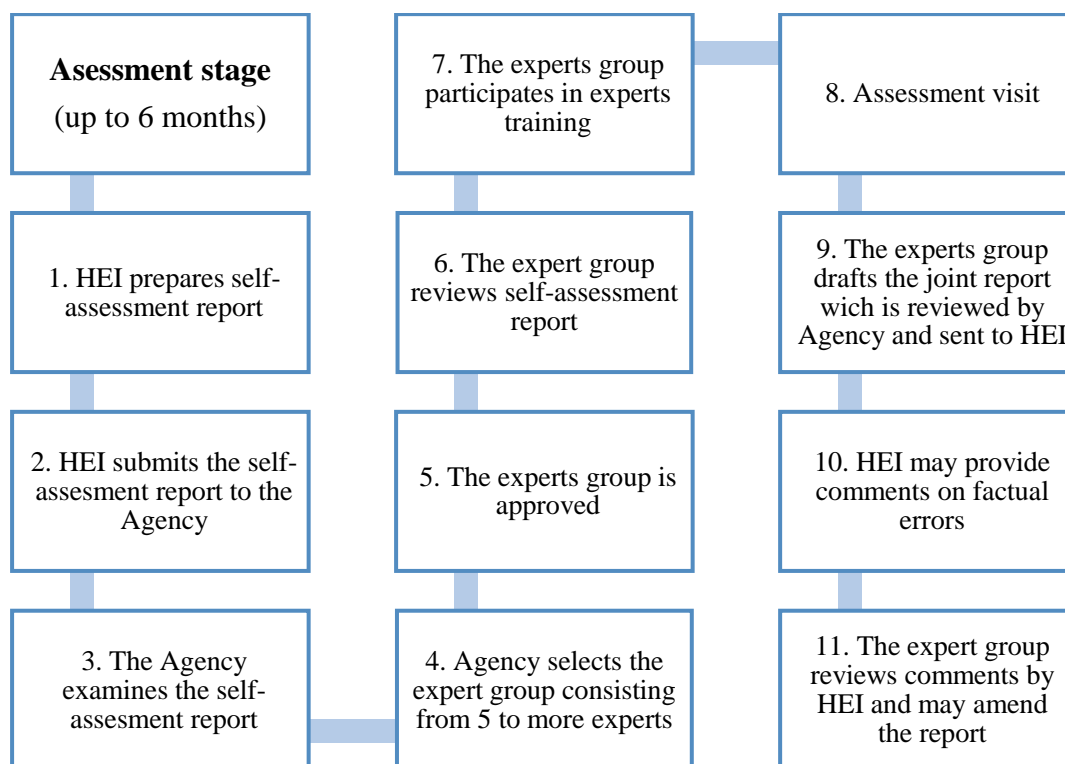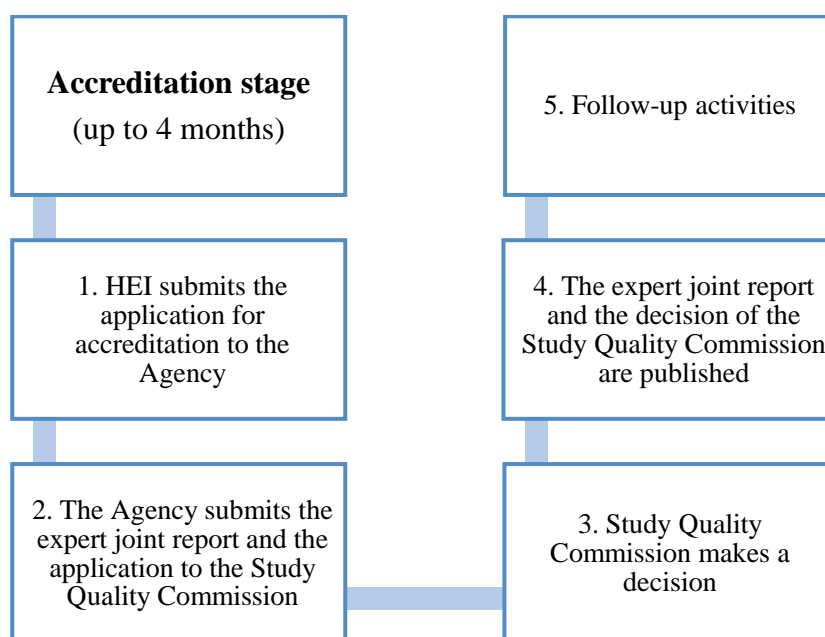*Figure 6. The steps for assessment of a study field.*

Asessment stage (up to 6 months)	7. The experts group participates in experts training	8. Assessment visit
1. HEI prepares self-assessment report	6. The expert group reviews self-assessment report	9. The experts group drafts the joint report wich is reviewed by Agency and sent to HEI
2. HEI submits the self-assesment report to the Agency	5. The experts group is approved	10. HEI may provide comments on factual errors
3. The Agency examines the self-assesment report	4. Agency selects the expert group consisting from 5 to more experts	11. The expert group reviews comments by HEI and may amend the report

Figure 7. The steps for accreditation (decision-making) of a study field.

Accreditation stage (up to 4 months)	5. Follow-up activities
1. HEI submits the application for accreditation to the Agency	4. The expert joint report and the decision of the Study Quality Commission are published
2. The Agency submits the expert joint report and the application to the Study Quality Commission	3. Study Quality Commission makes a decision

The final decision on the accreditation of the study field is made by SQC and accreditation could be granted for the duration of 6 years or 2 years, or the accreditation is denied. For a new study field,

accreditation for 2 years can be made no more than 2 consecutive times, but if the study field has previously been accredited, the decision on accreditation for 2 years can be taken no more than once in a row. The accredited study field permits HEI to issue state recognised diplomas.

It is planned to discontinue study field assessment ad accreditation procedure after year 2024 and replace it with the institutional accreditation procedure (this is already approved by the government).

4.4.4. Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)

Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes) is a non-cyclical activity that is done based on the request of HEIs if changes are made to their study programmes between cyclical assessments of study fields. This is rather technical procedure which is not designed as stand-alone procedures fully covering the ESG Part 2. It only covers the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation of study field. In most cases changes in study fields are under the autonomy of the HEI and are approved without involving experts.

The Cabinet regulations prescribe cases when changes are reviewed by one expert. In other cases, the changes are approved without experts' review. Decision is taken by the SQC or HEI itself depending on the scope of changes.

Experts are involved if changes are made in a study programme between two cyclical assessments of the study field and fall under one of cases mentioned in the respective Cabinet regulation:
- the changes in the name of the study programme, changes in the professional qualification or the degree to be acquired;
- changes in the relation of a study programme to the study field;
- the changes in the admission requirements of the study programme;
- changes introduced in a study programme during the accreditation period of the relevant study field to the duration or the amount of the study programme exceeds 20% of the amount of study programmes credit points defined in the application for accreditation;
- changes in the elected academic staff working in the HEIs study field or a study programme of the relevant study field since the last accreditation of the study field are at least 20% of the total number of elected academic staff members working in the relevant study field, or if at least 50% of the total amount of academic work at the HEI in the relevant study field (excluding the elective part of study programme, the implementation of traineeships and final examinations) is no longer provided by the academic staff members, who have been elected in the respective HEI.

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

Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field is a non-cyclical activity which is applicable to study programmes that are licensed after the accreditation of the relevant study field and which, within two years after starting its implementation, must receive an assessment in accordance with the Cabinet regulations. The procedure was included in the legal framework in 2019 by the Cabinet as a short-term solution due to the fact that the accreditation term of all study fields was extensively prolonged and there was a concern that newly licensed study programmes could prepare graduates without the study process being externally evaluated. the methodology was designed in 2021.

The purpose of this assessment is to address those assessment criteria which could not be effectively covered during the licensing procedure and would normally be covered during the accreditation of

study fields. In many cases HEIs skip this procedure and the programme is assessed within the accreditation of the relevant study field. Decision is taken by the SQC.

This procedure is not designed as stand-alone procedure fully covering the ESG Part 2. It only covers the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or

The nature of this procedure as a temporary solution, rather than a comprehensive and stand-alone quality assurance procedure, is also confirmed by its methodology which has been designed in the way that it addresses only those issues that could not be covered by "licensing of study programmes" and would otherwise be covered by "assessment/ accreditation of study fields".

The methodology would only be applicable to those study programmes which do not manage to undergo assessment/accreditation within the study field. In many cases HEIs skip this procedure, if the term allows, and the programme is assessed within the accreditation of the relevant study field.

4.4.6. Accreditation of study programmes abroad

Accreditation of study programmes abroad is a new assessment procedure which was introduced in 2020 as a response to demand from HEIs outside Latvia. It is applicable in higher education systems where the legal framework foresees accreditation of study programmes. Within this procedure separate study programmes are assessed and accredited.

General information on all stages of the assessment process and criteria (abstracts from the guidelines) has been published on the Agency website.[27]

The guidelines[28] for accreditation of foreign study programmes provide the framework for assessment of study programmes offered by foreign higher education institutions. The guidelines are intended for the use of foreign HEIs undergoing accreditation of study programmes, expert groups involved in the assessment, assessment coordinators and Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes.

The HEI is expected to describe and analyse its activities in regard to programme implementation along the defined criteria for programme assessment:
1) Strategy, aims and programme management;
2) Structure and content of the programme;
3) Teaching and learning materials;
4) Techniques and methods of educational activity;
5) Teaching staff;
6) Resources;
7) Research work;
8) Cooperation and internationalisation;
9) Employability of graduates;
10) Student services.

The accreditation procedure was conducted in 2020 – 2021 when high demand from Ukrainian HEIs was in place. Information on the completed assessment procedures abroad is available on the Agency`s website[29].

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[27] Accreditation of Foreign Study Programmes: https://www.aika.lv/en/for-higher-education-institutions/accreditation-of-foreign-study-programmes/
[28] Academic Information Centre/ Quality Agency for Higher Education Guidelines for accreditation of foreign study programmes: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/AIC_AFSP_guidelines_03032020.pdf
[29] Accreditation of Foreign Study Programmes. Decision Taking: https://www.aika.lv/en/for-higher-education-institutions/accreditation-of-foreign-study-programmes/decision-taking/

Despite the current situation in Ukraine, there is still demand from Ukrainian HEIs. However, due to the situation in Ukraine and also high workload with national assessment procedures the new assessment procedures from abroad are not accepted.

4.5. 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.

The Agency is involved and actively participates in the activities of international organisations through membership in such international networks:

- ENQA – The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – as affiliate in 2015 and as a full member since 2018. Head of the Agency has elected as a Board member in 2021. Senior expert of the Agency was involved in the working group on micro-credentials.
- Listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), since December 2018.
- CEENQA – Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education – since 2016. Head of the Agency served as a Board member 2018–2022.
- INQAAHE – the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, since 2015.
- ECA – the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education, since 2017.
- CHEA International Quality Group, since 2018.

The Agency as a partner has been involved in different international projects, such as:

- "Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance" (LIREQA) (2016-2018), aiming to contribute to fair recognition of qualifications by developing recommendations to relate academic recognition and both internal and external quality assurance.
- Twinning project AZ/14/ENI/OT/01/17 (AZ/49) "Support to strengthening the higher education system in Azerbaijan" (2018-2020), 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 general project objective was to further develop Azerbaijan's higher education system through aligning it with a competence-based education approach, as well as to improve external quality assurance system in Azerbaijan.
- EUNIQ "Developing a European Approach for Comprehensive QA of (European) University Networks" (2019 – 2021). The project is coordinated by NVAO on behalf of the Flemish Community and project consortium comprises eight quality assurance (QA) agencies, six ministries and the European stakeholders' organisations EUA, ESU and ENQA. As a result, the European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities was developed.
- DEQAR CONNECT "Enhancing the Coverage and Connectivity of QA in the EHEA through DEQAR" (2020-2022) – the project under the Erasmus+ call to support the implementation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reforms. The project focuses on two of the EHEA key commitments, supporting quality assurance and recognition inside the EHEA, and consists of two strands: 1) expand coverage to EHEA countries currently under-represented in DEQAR, by supporting the participation of agencies that could not join DEQAR in the first stage; 2) enhance connectivity by exploiting existing synergies and exploring new opportunities to use DEQAR data directly in the recognition workflow, digital credentialing and elsewhere.

As a result of the project Agency`s E-platform is connected with DEQAR and all data on the assessment and accreditation of study fields is transferred automatically to DEQAR.

- RoadMap for Implementation of Institutional Assessment in Latvia (2020-2022), funded by European Union ERASMUS + K3 program "Support for policy reforms". The Agency in cooperation with MoES implemented the project, which main objective was to improve the quality assurance system in Latvia and introduce a regular institutional accreditation as the main quality assurance procedure that will decrease the current overlap among the different quality assurance procedures and reduce the administrative burden as well as the costs of assessment procedures. In addition, the staff of the Agency had an opportunity to participate in several webinars with other quality assurance agencies (Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Netherlands, Sweden).

The Agency has also tight cooperation with other departments of AIC and provides support to the implementation of other international projects.

In addition, an important activity for the Baltic region is the annual networking meeting and seminar of the quality assurance agencies from the Baltic States where the staff meets to share experience and discuss the challenges and tendencies in external quality assurance. In 2018 and in 2022 the meeting was organised by the Agency, in 2019 by agency of Lithuania. Unfortunately, during the pandemic in 2020-2021 it was not possible to have face-to-face meeting. The next meeting is planned in 2023 in Estonia.

The Agency has established cooperation with other quality assurance agencies and use opportunity for exchange of experience and learning good practice. The staff members of the Agency visited several quality assurance agencies in order to get acquainted with quality assurance processes in other countries, e.g. NOKUT (Norway), AI (Denmark), NAKVIS (Slovenia), CEEMAN (Slovenia), HCERES (France), AQ Austria and others.

5. COMPLIANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES PART 3

5.1. Activities, Policy and Processes for Quality Assurance [ESG 3.1]

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 as a quality assurance agency is emphasised in the Statutes of AIC which state the following task:

to support the quality assurance of higher education by organising the evaluation of HEI, study fields and study programmes, including their accreditation and licensing.

As mentioned earlier in the SAR, the quality assurance function is clearly separated from other functions of AIC through a separate department "Quality Agency for Higher Education - AIKA" (Agency), which is also confirmed in the by-laws of the Agency.

Quality assurance is emphasized in the mission statement[30] of the Agency:
- it promotes the improvement of quality of higher education of Latvia and contributes to the development of quality culture and its maintenance in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA;
- it carries out 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;
- its high reputation is provided by the professionalism of the staff of the Agency and assessment experts, accumulated experience in the change management processes of higher education in Europe, including Eastern and Central Europe.

Strategic directions[31] for 2017-2022 of the development of the Agency, as well mission and strategic goals of the Agency are defined in cooperation with stakeholders. For developing strategic directions for 2017-2022 the working group with representatives of different stakeholders such as HEIs, students and employers was established. Also strategic directions 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 2017-2022. 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.

Considering the pandemic situation caused by Covid-19, it was not possible to fully implement prior defined activities, therefore it was decided to extend the term of strategy including 2022. The new strategic period is planned for 2023-2027. 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. Annual activity reports[32] are publicly available on website of the Agency.

Currently the work on the development of the new strategic directions for period 2023-2027 is in the process. In 2022 the survey was disseminated among all stakeholders in order to review the work

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[30] The Quality Agency for Higher Education Mission and Strategy, https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/about-aika/
[31] Strategic directions of the Agency, https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/about-aika/
[32] Annual activity report, https://www.aika.lv/aika/darbibas-parskati/ (in Latvian)

done within the previous period and to put forward strategic aims for the next period. In overall all stakeholders agreed that strategic objectives set in the previous period are mainly achieved and some positive key aspects were mentioned, such as:

- the Agency is a safeguard for ESG and follows their implementation in higher education area
- the Agency is a crucial cooperation partner in quality assurance area
- activities of the Agency facilitate the improvement of higher education quality in Latvia and its international recognition
- the Agency ensures methodological support and unified approach, as well as independent quality assessment and unbiased analysis.

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. The Council comprises 8 members representing different stakeholder organisations:

1. The AIC chairperson,
2. Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science,
3. Representative of the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (represented by the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees)
4. Representative of the Latvian Employers' Confederation,
5. Representative of the Association of Colleges of Latvia,
6. Representative of the Rectors' Council,
7. Representative of the Students Union of Latvia,
8. The President of the Council of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The chair of the Council is a representative of the Latvian Employers` Confederation. The organisation of work, tasks, composition, 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 are prescribed by the Rules of Procedure[33]. The Council is involved in the strategic issues of the Agency and approves the SQC and Appeals Commission.

Both decision making bodies - SQC and Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes, include student and employers representatives.

5.2. Official Status [ESG 3.2]

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 2.1.2. 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)).

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[33] Rules of Procedure of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rules-of-Procedure-of-the-Higher-Education-Quality-Assurance-Council.pdf

During the period 2016 – 2019 the ESF project" "The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency", No. 8.2.4.0/15/I/001, was implemented with aim to build Agency`s capacity in order to meet ESG standards and to be listed in EQAR.

The role and tasks of AIC as a Quality Agency are defined in the Law on Higher Education Institutions[34]:

- Section 9. Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions;
- Section 55.[2] Licensing of a Study Programme
- Section 55.[3] Opening and Accreditation of a Study Field
- and respective Cabinet regulations (No 793, 794 and 795).

In addition, in 2022 the amendments to the Education Law[35] were approved in order to emphasize quality assurance in higher education (Section 20.[1], Paragraph (4)), and respectively the role of the Agency in quality assurance of higher education.

Decisions of the Agency comply with the requirements for formal decisions under the Administrative Procedure Law and respective legislative acts.

The Agency in strategic issues is supervised by the Council, which consists of 8 members, representatives of different stakeholder organisations. The composition and functions of the Council are stated in the Cabinet regulation No 795 and the Rules of Procedure[36].

The Agency operates in compliance with national legislations in the field of higher education and with respect to ESG.

5.3. Independence [ESG 3.3]

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.

The independence of the Agency is defined by regulatory enactments, meaning that in all activities of the Agency it operates independently and autonomously: developing methodologies and criteria, training and selection of assessment experts, selection of members of SQC and Appeals Commission, hiring new staff members, web page, communication with HEIs, ministries and other stakeholders.

Although the main functions of the Agency are stated in the regulatory enactments, the Agency is independent in developing its principles and procedures for quality assessment and in adopting decisions, as in the legislation only the main lines are set, but further details are under the competence of the Agency.

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

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

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[34] Law on Higher Education Institutions: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967 (translation in English is outdated as last translated amendments are dated by June 2021). The up-to-date version is in Latvian only: https://likumi.lv/ta/id/37967-augstskolu-likums

[35] Education Law: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/50759 (translation in English is outdated as last translated amendments are dated by April 2021). The up-to-date version is in Latvian only: https://likumi.lv/ta/id/50759-izglitibas-likums

[36] Rules of Procedure of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rules-of-Procedure-of-the-Higher-Education-Quality-Assurance-Council.pdf

AIC is a public non-profit foundation acting in accordance with Associations and Foundations Law, which states that the administrative body of a foundation is the 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 the rights and responsibilities of the board and the chairperson of the board are stated. In accordance with AIC Statutes the chairperson is responsible for all activities of AIC. Chairperson of the AIC board recruits the Head of the Agency by public competition.

The collegial strategic management body of the Agency is the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (Council), which includes 8 members representing different stakeholder organisations:

AIC, MoES, Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (represented by the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees), LDDK, Association of Colleges of Latvia, Council of Rectors, Students Union of Latvia, the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The chair of the Council is a representative of the LDDK, the full information on the composition[37] is available at the website of the Agency. The composition of organisations is set in the Cabinet regulations No 795, which means that organisations delegate its representative for the work in the Council. The main functions and composition, including the election of the chair of the Council are stated in Cabinet regulations. Council acts in accordance with its approved Rules of the Procedure[38] and its decisions are taken by common agreement.

SQC is approved by the Council based on the proposal of the Agency for the term of 5 years. The candidates are selected by open call based on the procedure elaborated by the Agency. The SQC includes 7 members, including students and employers' representatives, with experience in organising and ensuring higher education. The composition of the SQC is balanced as to region and type of higher education institution (private/public, university/college). The full information on the composition[39] is available at the website of the Agency.

The main functions of the SQC are set in the Law on Higher Education Institutions, Cabinet regulations No. 793 and 795. The SQC acts in accordance with the Rules[40] of the SQC which are approved by the Council. The SQC makes decisions on the accreditation of study fields, licensing of study programmes, inclusion of licensed programme into the study field and substantial changes in study field and its programmes. Decisions are taken by common agreement and in full autonomy. The independence of the SQC decisions is reinforced by the emphasis that its members are not representing their employers (e.g. HEIs or the unions), but represent the whole field of higher education of Latvia as independent and professional experts. In addition, non-conflict-of-interest principles are set in the Rules of the SQC.

Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes is approved by the chairperson of AIC based on the proposal of the Agency for the term of 3 years. The candidates are selected by open call based on the procedure elaborated by the Agency. This commission includes 5 members, including students and employers' representatives, with experience in organising and ensuring higher education and representing different fields of science. The full information on the composition[41] is available at the website of the Agency. The commission acts in accordance with the Rules of Procedure[42].

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[37] Composition of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council, https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/higher-education-quality-assurance-council/
[38] Rules of Procedure of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rules-of-Procedure-of-the-Higher-Education-Quality-Assurance-Council.pdf
[39] Composition of the Study Quality Commission, https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/study-quality-committee/
[40] Rules of the Study Quality Committee: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Rules-of-the-Study-Quality-Committee.pdf
[41] Composition of the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes, https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/accreditation-commission-for-foreign-study-programmes/
[42] Rules of Procedure Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes, https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ASPAK_reglaments_30112020.pdf (currently in Latvian, translation is in the revision process)

Decisions are taken by common agreement and in full autonomy, considering non-conflict-of-interest principles.

Appeals Commission is approved by the Council based on the proposal of the Agency for the term of 2 years. The candidates are selected by open call based on the procedure elaborated by the Agency. The Appeals Commission includes 4 members who are professionals with experience in legal issues and with experience in organising and ensuring higher education. The full information on the composition[43] is available at the website of the Agency. The main functions are set in the Law on Higher Education Institutions, Cabinet regulations No. 793 and 795 and in the Rules of Procedure[44]. Decisions are taken by common agreement and in full autonomy. The independence of the SQC decisions is reinforced by the emphasis that its members are not representing their employers (e.g. HEIs or the unions), but represent the whole field of higher education of Latvia as independent and professional experts. In addition, non-conflict-of-interest principles are set in the Rules of the.

The Agency is also independent in its operations. The Agency operates as a separate administrative unit within the AIC (as a host organisation) in accordance with by-law approved by the chairperson of the board.

The financial independence from the host organisation is guaranteed by a separate programme in the state budget, which the Agency can independently decide how to use.

The Agency is responsible for developing assessment methodologies, guidelines for self-assessment reports and experts reports, for developing criteria and procedure for approval of experts for the assessments and other documents related to the assessment 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[45] for approval of experts for the assessment procedures 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.

The Agency conducts its staff recruitment independently. The Head of the Agency decides on opening position and decides on the recruitment team that will carry out the interviews. The Head of the Agency makes a final decision on the appointment of a new employee based on the recruitment results, and chairperson of the board approve by signing labour agreement. The Agency staff cannot take part in the handling of applications from HEIs by which they were employed or had ties with in the last two years.

5.4. Thematic Analysis [ESG 3.4]

Standard:

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

Thematic analyses are seen as an instrument for development and improvement of the Agency`s activities. In order to achieve the strategic objectives of the Agency in a transparent way, the Agency regularly prepares different types of thematic analysis. These includes analyses of the process and results of external assessments, annual reports summarising all activities of the Agency and results

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[43] Composition of the Appeals Commission, https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/appeals-committee/
[44] The Rules of Procedures of the Appeals Commission, https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Apelacijas_komisijas_nolikums.pdf (in Latvian)
[45] Criteria and principles for the selection of experts, https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Ekspertu_atlases_kriteriji_un_principi_2019.pdf (currently in Latvian, translation is in the revision process)

of assessment procedures, as well as more comprehensive analysis of each study field based on the experts reports and SQC decisions, which are published at the website of the Agency.

Thematic analysis on each study field is a novelty which was not implemented before. According to the Law on HEIs, accreditation of study fields is organised in groups for each year, therefore the assessment of certain study field is conducting in one period, which gives a great opportunity to analyse field at national level.

1) "Psychology", "Law", "Economics", "Information and Communication Sciences" and "Management, Administration and Management of Real Property" shall be accredited by 31 December 2021

2) "Mechanics and metal processing, heat power engineering, heat technology and mechanical engineering", "Power Industry, Electrical Engineering and Electrical Technologies", "Manufacture and Processing", "Architecture and Construction", "Agriculture, Forestry, Fishery, Veterinary Medicine and Food Hygiene", "Health Care" and "Social Welfare" shall be accredited by 31 December 2022

3) "Arts", "Religion and Theology", "History and Philosophy", "Geography and Earth Sciences", "Wildlife Sciences", "Chemistry, Chemistry Technologies and Biotechnology", "Physics, Material Science, Mathematics and Statistics", and "Information Technology, Computer Hardware, Electronics, Telecommunications, Computer Management and Computer Science" shall be accredited by 31 December 2023.

4) "Education, Pedagogy and Sports", "Language and Culture Studies, Mother Tongue Studies and Language Programmes", "Translation", "Sociology, Political Science and Anthropology", "Hotel and Restaurant Service, Tourism and Recreation Organisation", "Transport Services", "Environmental Protection", "Internal Security and Civil Protection" and "Military Defence" shall be accredited by 31 December 2024.

Thematic analysis on each study field is planned according to this schedule of accreditation of study field. As the first group of study fields accreditation is finished, thematic analysis is foreseen for each of these fields. At the time of writing this SAR, the reports are prepared for study fields "Psychology", "Law" and "Information and Communication Sciences"", the other two are in the drafting process. These reports will be published at the website of the Agency and also disseminated among stakeholders. The aim of these reports is to summarise the data of study field (including study programmes in the field), to analyse results of evaluation, strong and weak points of each study field identified by experts and highlight the main recommendations provided by experts. The Agency believes that such reports could achieve several purposes: firstly, all stakeholders and society is informed about the quality of studies, secondly, potential students could make a justified choice for their studies, thirdly, HEIs could analyse in what fields and disciplines programmes could be developed, fourthly, and lastly, policy-makers could make a justified decision on the funding of certain fields.

Another type of thematic analysis is analysis based on the received feedback after assessment procedures both from HEIs and assessment experts. These analyses are based on questionnaires, which contains such topics as a quality of self-assessment report, training of experts, site-visit, work of experts, experts` report, work and guidelines prepared by the Agency. This analysis is extremely important for continuously improving the work performance of the Agency. The feedback is carefully analysed and considered, which was confirmed by comparing results of the feedback provided in 2017 and 2021, where the work performance of the Agency was higher evaluated in 2021.

In addition to the thematic analyses, the Agency also conducts analysis on different topical issues. As a respond to the changes in the assessment procedures caused by the pandemic, Covid-19, the Agency has prepared thematic analysis "Organisation of Assessments in Covid-19 times"[46]. This

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[46] Report on Organizing assessment procedures during COVID-19. Stakeholder perspective (available in Latvian only): https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Analitiskais_zinojums_attalinatas_vizites_AIKA-3.pdf

report is based on the feedback provided by HEIs and assessment experts. The reports are available at the website of the Agency and the seminar was organised to present the results of this analysis. In addition, the results of this analysis were presented at the webinar "Assessment visits – partially remotely or partially on-site? Experience and future improvements", where not only analysis was presented, but also assessment experts and HEIs shared their experience.

Within the reporting period, publication on the development of quality assurance system in Latvia and transition from study programme to institutional assessment was published in 2018 "Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level" (authors A. Kažoka, J. Silka and A. Rauhvargers)[47]. This publication has led to further discussions to the transition to cyclical institutional accreditation, which were started in 2019.

In the occasion of ENQA 20th anniversary, the Agency contributed to the ENQA publication "ENQA Advancing quality in European higher education celebrating 20 years of ENQA"[48] by preparing the article "Impact of ENQA on the development of a national quality assurance system and a quality assurance agency: the Latvian perspective" (authors A. Kažoka and J. Silka)

Also, on request of the MoES Agency annually prepares informative analytical reports on the results of assessment conducted in a respective year. These reports provide statistical data, analysis of the results and recommendations, which could be used by the MoES for the necessary improvements in higher education system and decision making.

In addition, the Agency prepares annual reports on all activities of the Agency conducted in a respective year. These reports are publicly available at the website[49] of Agency and give overview on all activities of the Agency set in the strategic directions.

Although these activities require a significant amount of work, the Agency believes that they contribute to the quality improvement of HEIs, to external evaluation system and the national system of higher education in general.

5.5. Resources [ESG 3.5]

Standard:

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

During the reporting period, the Agency has moved to another premises. In time of previous review the office of the Agency was located in the centre of Riga – Dzirnavu Street 16. The total space of the AIC office was 606,2 m^2, from which 156,10 m^2 was the Agency`s premises. There was also a conference room with the capacity of 40 people (38,4 m^2), where working meetings and small seminars were held, one common room and utility rooms. In July 2021, the Agency moved to other premises close to the previous ones – Dzirnavu Street 16/k2, with total space 622,10 m^2, from which 208,80 m^2 are for the Agency needs, in addition there is a conference room of 39,80 m^2. The Agency`s staff considers the move to the new premises positively as there are more space and they are more modern.

The Agency's revenue consists of the fees paid for the assessment procedures:

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[47] Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level: https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Moving-Quality-Assurance-from-Programme-to-Institutional-Level.pdf

[48] Advancing quality in European higher education celebrating 20 years of ENQA: https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/Advancing-quality-in-European-higher-education-celebrating-20-years-of-ENQA.pdf

[49] Annual Activity reports of the Agency, https://www.aika.lv/aika/darbibas-parskati/ (in Latvian)

- Assessment and accreditation of study fields, substantial changes in study fields and inclusion of licensed study programme in accredited study field – price list[50] set by the Agency and approved b AIC board chairperson.
- Licensing of study programmes and accreditation of HEI – price list for AIC services set by Cabinet regulations[51].

In accordance with both price lists, 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 considering that service fees do not cover the full costs of the implementation of the functions of the Agency, a certain amount of the state budget is allocated every year. The state budget covers the costs of the implementation of the functions of the Agency in order to ensure sustainability and the independence of the activities of the Agency. 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" and agreements between AIC and MoES, where under separate programme finances are allocated for the Agency. In addition, the Agency has submitted several reports and justifications to the MoES for requiring additional funds for ensuring implementation of state functions delegated to the Agency.

In the period 2016-2019 ESF project within the specific support scope 8.2.4 "The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency" was implemented and the Agency had 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.

Regarding the transition to institutional accreditation policy documents also envisage plans to allocate additional funding within the ESF project.

Table 4. Funding of the Agency (euro).

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 (Jan-Oct)
Total funding of the Agency	**587761,29**	**778873,53**	**1202534,1**	**1128549,6**	**916113,00**
State budget	299216,00	293317,00	359911,00	424918,00	353275,00
ESF project "The support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency"	189 056,29	244 605,53	42 463,08	0	0
Fee from HEIs according to the Price-lists	99 489,00	240 951,00	800 160,00	703 631,55	562 838,00

The main positions of the Agency`s expenditures include staff remuneration, the remuneration for review experts, the remuneration for the members of SQC and Appeals Commission, as well as the expenses for the technical maintenance of the E-platform 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

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[50] The price list for paid services of the Agency. Only in Latvian. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/AIC_CENR%C4%80DIS_2021.pdf (in Latvian)

[51] Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 430 "Price list of paid services of the Academic Information Centre". Only in Latvian. https://likumi.lv/ta/id/333992-nodibinajuma-akademiskas-informacijas-centrs-maksas-pakalpojumu-cenradis (in Latvian)

the Agency also include the costs of rent and maintenance, office items and communications, accounting services and exceptional expenses.

The remuneration of staff is competitive compared to employees with similar qualification in the similar field.

The Agency is managed by the Head of the Agency. In 2019 there were changes in the organisational structure of the Agency and currently the Agency comprises two Heads of the units, two lawyers, one e-system administrator, one office manager (secretary), two senior experts and nine experts (coordinate assessment procedures) (see the organisational structure in section 4.2.). At the time of writing this self-assessment report the position of a deputy head is open.

Due to the increased workload, the number of permanent staff has been increased, comparing with previous review in 2017 when 11 permanent staff members were in place. Currently there are 18 staff members in the Agency:

- 9 experts – assessment coordinators (job title "expert" is used in the job description), whose main task is to organise the quality assessment procedures
- 2 senior experts – one of them is working with financial issues and other one is responsible for the secretariat of SQC and Appeals Commission
- 2 lawyers, whose duties include the development of regulations, contracts, drafts of assessment decisions and assurance the Agency`s work compliance with the requirements of regulatory enactments
- 1 office manager (secretary), who is responsible for all incoming and outgoing documentation and for archiving of the assessment procedures, as well as assisting with administrative tasks.
- 1 E-system administrator, who is responsible for administrating E-platform for study fields assessment and accreditation, experts` data base and E-platform publicly available information on licensed, accredited study programmes and HEIs (https://eplatforma.aika.lv/)
- The Head of Quality Assessment unit is responsible for managing of all assessment procedures
- The Head of Development and International Cooperation unit is responsible for the cooperation and communication, including through such tools as the website of the Agency and E-platform.
- The Head of Agency is responsible for the entire work of the Agency, including strategic management and planning, communication with stakeholders at national and international level etc.

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. At least once a year the Head of the Agency conducts a development interview with every employee in order to identify the needs and areas to be improved.

The majority of staff is competent and experienced, including experience in quality assurance as assessment experts or policy developers. All employees have at least bachelor degree or equivalent qualification, moreover, in the managerial position employees have master degree and professional experience in quality assurance.

The employees regularly develop their professional skills by attending conferences, seminars and trainings. For instance, in 2019 staff has visited several quality assurance agencies such as NOKUT (Norway), AI (Denmark), NAKVIS (Slovenia), CEEMAN (Slovenia), HCERES (France), AQ Austria, UNIBASQ (Spain), A3ES (Portugal). However, during pandemic staff actively participated in numerous webinars.

The information on the Agency and assessments is available on the website of the Agency, whereas the information on the HEIs, study fields and study programmes are available at the E-platform developed by the Agency. Information on the website of the Agency and on the E-platform is available in both languages Latvian and English.

As a valuable tool for efficient and resources-saved tool, the Agency has developed the E-platform[52] for assessment of Higher Education Institutions, accreditation of Study Fields and licensing of Study Programmes. The main users are the Agency, HEIs, assessment experts and SQC.

The aim for developing E-platform was:
- to support the Agency in implementing quality assurance procedures;
- to decrease the burden for HEIs when preparing and submitting the self-evaluation reports and for experts when preparing expert reports;
- to ensure publicly accessible information on higher education institutions, study fields and study programmes in Latvia.

E-platform consists of two parts:
- public, where all updated information on HEIs, study fields and study programmes, accreditation and licensing data and reports of HEIs and assessment experts is available
- internal – where only registered users have certain restricted access.

In autumn of 2019 the first stage of developing E-platform was finished and E-platform was officially launched. The extensive range of trainings was organised for the staff of the Agency, for HEIs, for assessment experts and SQC. The trainings for HEIs are still organised for those HEIs representatives who expressed interest. These trainings are organised in small groups where representatives of HEIs practically work on their own laptops and follow to all steps of assessment procedure – accreditation and assessment of study fields. In addition, there are several video materials[53] created for acquiring information about E-platform.

Currently the assessment procedure – accreditation and assessment of study fields – is conducted solely through E-platform, which ensures managing of procedure:
- Submission of HEIs` applications and self-evaluation reports
- Reviewing the applications and self-evaluation reports
- Submission of additional information
- Selection and approval of expert groups
- Preparation of the agenda for site visit
- Preparation of the experts' report
- Submission of comments on factual errors in the expert report
- Submission of reports on implementation of expert recommendations

According to the users` number, currently in the E-platform there are 413 users (including the Agency, HEIs, and SQC users; excluding experts), from which 385 users are representing 44 different HEIs. In E-platform there are 235 procedures which are either currently active or completed.

E-platform is connected with DEQAR, which means that all information regarding study fields assessment and accreditation is transferring to DEQAR automatically. Also, it is planned to connect E-platform with State Education Information System (state register of education) in order that all respective data are transferred to both directions, currently only information on HEIs data (registration data) is linked.

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[52] AIKA E-platform: https://eplatforma.aika.lv/
[53] Video materials about E-platform: https://www.aika.lv/aktuali/foto-video/

It is planned to expand the work of E-platform by ensuring also the managing of other assessment procedures. The prerequisites, including technical, for launching licensing of study programmes are developed and testing by external users and first applications are envisaged in 2023.

As it was mentioned in the SAR, there is plan to transfer external quality assurance system to the cyclical institutional accreditation, therefore E-platform will be also developed and adjusted to the institutional assessment and accreditation.

In overall, it could be concluded that both financial and human resources are sufficient and adequate for implementing activities and for further development.

5.6. Internal Quality Assurance and Professional Conduct [ESG 3.6]

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 Agency in collaboration with stakeholders 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 the staff of the Agency and involved stakeholders have common understanding, and the society is informed about quality standards of the Agency. Information on quality policy is available on the Agency's website[54]. The necessity for the improvement of the quality management system is assessed and planned within the annual strategic planning and control process.

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 Council 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. Considering the pandemic situation caused by Covid-19, it was not possible to fully implement prior defined activities, therefore it was decided to extend the term of strategy including 2022. The new strategic period is planned for 2023-2027. 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.

The staff of the Agency has joint meetings every week 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, a separate additional meeting is organised, involving also other staff, for example, the lawyer.

For planning and organising seminars or any events usually a working group is established, 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 (or Zoom) is used.

The Agency has adopted the so called "open door" policy which encourages employees to come to their heads with questions, concerns and for discussion about issues, therefore reducing the barrier between the management and staff and creating a more open environment. The daily communication takes places in a face-to-face mode or using online platforms (Zoom), 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.

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[54] AIKA Mission and Strategy. https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/about-aika/

There are internal interviews that are held regularly between the Head of the Agency and each employee to discuss the work environment, workload, challenges and possibilities for growth. Such meetings help to create more harmonised work atmosphere, overcome possible challenges and introduce ideas for further improvement.

Regarding the assessment procedures, each expert – assessment coordinator, after receiving a new application, prepares time schedule which includes all steps of the procedure. The schedule is then agreed by the Head of Quality Assessment unit. After the site visit the experts – assessment 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 the work of experts, 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 further improvements.

The Agency has formulated Quality policy[55] which defines the quality as the level to which the Agency can fulfil the requirements of the society and the needs of the stakeholders. In order to improve the working culture and increase the trust of the society, the Agency adheres to the rules of professional conduct, including the Code of Ethics (reapproved in 2022).

The Quality Management Manual describes the internal quality assurance system of the Agency, its aim and standards, as well as the management of internal processes. The Agency has created the Process and Measurement System where the main operating, management and support processes and measurements have been identified. The measurements have been identified based on whether it is possible to evaluate the quality of the process and integrity, as well as to use them for the improvement of the work of the Agency.

The Head of the Agency is responsible for the quality management in the Agency, simultaneously 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.

The PDCA approach is integrated into both strategic planning and management, as well as operational activities, which allows flexibility in decision-making.

1. Plan (The management process)

The strategic development directions were set in 2017 for a 5 years period, however, due to the Covid-19, the period was extended to one year, therefore at this moment the first strategic cycle is coming to the end. The Agency has 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 (6) years period. In the years 2 to 6 the Agency performed strategic control and update the plan, if needed.

The strategic plan was approved by the Council. It is also planned to involve partners in the development of the strategy for the next term, initially providing feedback on the implementation of the Strategy and on the next stage obtaining recommendations for future strategic directions.

In addition to the strategic plan, the management of the Agency (after discussions with staff, and received feedback from HEI and assessment experts) develops an annual operational plan which includes the main tasks foreseen for the next year and indicators for improvement of staff qualification/ competence. During the year the management analyses the results and, if it is necessary, makes changes to the plan.

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[55] AIKA Mission and Strategy. https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/about-aika/

In order to plan the workload of the Agency, each year a schedule for submission of assessment applications for study fields is created and discussed with HEIs. However, it is not possible to plan the number of applications for other assessment types, because the Agency as the only authorised institution has obligation to conduct assessment types as stated in the legislation.

For assessment procedures guidelines and methodologies have been developed and are publicly available, which helps ensure predictability and a unified approach to assessment procedures.

2. Do (Agency)

At this point all strategic plans, the annual plan and activities, provided guidelines and methodologies come together, the main processes are carried in accordance with the tasks defined in job descriptions. The staff is very much interested 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 activities of the Agency in general.

The staff accumulates the data about process outcomes, findings are discussed in weekly meetings and necessary steps are taken if any improvements are needed. In order to support the work of the staff members and decrease time for performing each procedure, several aids are created, e.g. diagrams (schemes) of assessment processes, sample presentations, sample e-mails, handbook for assessment coordinators etc. Also, there is a system in place for smooth integration of new staff members, including that there is always more experienced staff member appointed to a newcomer for going through all assessment steps together.

3. Check (Agency)

The Agency strongly believes that it is crucial that the implementation of the annual plan is monitored on a regular basis. At the end of each year the Agency reviews the annual plan and identifies the necessary improvements for the next year's plan.

From practical side, during the procedures the assessment coordinators are asked to create a portfolio or documentation package for each assessment procedure, which ensures that the most relevant information is available in one place. In order to ensure the best possible result, it is determined that the results of the examination of HEI submissions, in addition to the review performed by the coordinator, are coordinated by Head of Quality Assessment Unit. This approach primarily helps to ensure that the Agency requests unified information to HEI and secondly, at this stage additional comments are provided to the coordinators. A similar approach is also applied to the review stage of the evaluation experts' opinions, where additionally one more staff member reviews experts` opinion (report). This is a way how the assessment coordinator can analyse his performance and improve his or her work in the next procedure. In addition, it ensures that management is aware which are strong and weak points of the performance of the staff members and can undertake relevant measures, e.g. provide trainings, advises etc.

As it was mentioned before, the feedback from all involved parties is crucial for the work of Agency, examples how the provided feedback affects the improvements made in the procedures and operations of the Agency is seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Examples of how the provided feedback affects the improvements made in the procedures and operations of the Agency.

Feedback provider	Method of acquisition	Actions (examples)
Feedback from the staff of the Agency	• Weekly meetings, in addition there are individual meetings • Annual discussions, including strategic issues	• In accordance with the recommendations given, the guidelines for the assessment of study fields have been revised

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

According to the examples indicated above, it can be concluded that the opinions of the involved stakeholders are considered in all stages of PDCA. It is important to note that the Agency not only receives feedback but takes corrective actions.

4. Act

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

- if needed, changes are done in annual plan and other related documents;
- 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.

In general, it should be noted that the mentioned approach ensures unified work approach, including ability to be flexible and adaptive to different circumstances.

5.7. Cyclical External Review of Agencies [ESG 3.7]

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 taken part in the external review and intends to do so in the future as well. The previous review was conducted in 2017-2018. After the first external review the Agency had progress visit, which was organised online due to the Covid-19 restrictions, and submitted follow-up report in June 2020.

The recommendations given in the previous review were considered carefully and introduced for further improvement of activities of the Agency.

6. COMPLIANCE WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES PART 2

6.1. Consideration of Internal Quality Assurance [ESG 2.1]

Standard:

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

With a goal to strengthen the HEI responsibility towards the quality of offered studies, to make a comprehensive and analytical self-assessment of their activities and to promote understanding and need to follow standards and guidelines set in ESG part 1, the Agency has elaborated guidelines for the development of self-assessment reports for each assessment procedure.

The Agency strongly believes that it is important for all involved parties to have a common understanding regarding standards set in ESG, therefore, the Agency has continued work to ensure that not only the guidelines and methodologies developed by the Agency, but also the external regulatory framework is compliant with ESG.

Considering that already in the previous review in 2017, the Agency managed to ensure independency in creation of guidelines and methodologies for assessment procedures, it was important that achieved independency is even more strengthened during the further amendments in external regulatory framework which were carried out in 2018. These amendments, among other things, affected the external quality assessment procedures, including the provision that the assessment and accreditation of the study field are divided into two separate procedures, thus allowing HEIs to choose any EQAR agency for the assessment part. Considering these changes, previous Cabinet regulations were replaced by Cabinet regulations No. 793, No. 794 and No. 795. During the development of these regulations, the Agency actively participated in order to ensure that the previously achieved results and used approaches are considered and independence of the Agency in the development of the methodologies and guidelines of the assessment procedures is ensured. As a result, the approved regulations stipulate that the Agency is responsible for the methodologies and guidelines of the assessment procedures, with the regulations providing only general requirements to be considered in the decision-making process.

Considering that Agency follows the PDCA principle in its work, based on the feedback received, in 2021, amendments to the guidelines for the development of the self-evaluation report of the study field were approved. After the approval of the amendments, seminars for HEIs were organised to explain the changes.

The Agency has developed a set of methodologies, a corresponding set of guidelines for each of the procedure. 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.

All the methodologies and guidelines are published and available on the website of the Agency[56].

The interconnection of the Law and Cabinet regulations, methodologies and guidelines is demonstrated in the Table 6.

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[56] AIKA Internal Rules and Regulations: https://www.aika.lv/en/laws-and-regulations-publications/internal-rules-and-regulations/

Table 6. The interconnection of the Law on Higher Education Institutions and Cabinet regulations, methodologies and guidelines.

External regulations	*Law on Higher Education Institutions*[57] *Regulations No. 793*[58] *Regulations No. 794*[59] *Regulations No. 795*[60]	• Formulates a general framework for external assessment • Authorises the Agency to develop methodologies and guidelines following national regulations and ESG • State possible outcomes of the assessment procedures.
Internal regulations	*Assessment methodologies*	• Developed by following the ESG, particularly part 2, and requirements set in national external regulatory framework • Set procedural steps, involved parties, their rights and obligations.
Internal regulations	*Guidelines for self-assessment and experts report*	• Developed by following the ESG, particularly part 1, and requirements set in national external regulatory framework • For HEI: The purpose of the guidelines is to provide the HEI with a structured framework for the preparation of the Self-Assessment Report. The guidelines prescribe the information to be included in the Self-Assessment Report, as well as its structure and form and also the information to be included in the application. There are also samples and additional explanation provided. • The compliance with the unified guidelines for the preparation of the Self-Assessment Report facilitates the work of both the HEI and the experts in the assessment process. • For assessment experts: The purpose of the guidelines is to provide the experts with a structured framework for the preparation of the joint opinion (report). The unified template includes also additional explanation.

The mapping on how the ESG Part 1 is reflected in the guidelines for preparing the self-assessment reports and the guidelines for the experts reports, as well as the alignment between self-assessment reports and expert reports for assessment procedures at national level, is included in the Table 7. It is evident form the Table 7 that within the assessment procedure - inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field – mainly the progress since licensing of a study programme is evaluated. Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes) has not been mapped against the ESG as it is not possible due to the nature of this procedure, where only one certain aspect (e.g. change of the language of instruction) is reviewed. The Agency has also mapped the assessment procedure – accreditation of HEIs, although it is not active procedure and it will be redrafted due to the transition to cyclical accreditation of HEIs.

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[57] Law on Higher Education Institutions: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967-law-on-higher-education-institutions (translation in English is outdated as last translated amendments are dated by June 2021)

[58] Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303956-regulations-regarding-opening-and-accreditation-of-study-fields

[59] Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Colleges: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303892-regulations-regarding-accreditation-of-higher-education-institutions-and-colleges

[60] Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes: https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303957-regulations-regarding-licensing-of-study-programmes

Table 7. The interconnection of ESG Part 1 to the assessment procedures at national level

ESG Part 1	Licensing of study programmes	Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field	Assessment and accreditation of study fields	Institutional accreditation
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	***Self-assessment report:*** I. Compliance of the Study Programme with the Study Direction (criterion 1.2.) III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.4., 3.5.) Annex 12 Information about the possibilities to continue studies in case the study programme is closed down ***The experts report:*** III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3., 4.)	***Self-assessment report*** Part II: 2. Actuality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.3). ***The experts report:*** 2. Topicality of the study programme (criteria 1).	***Self-assessment report:*** <u>Part 1 (criteria 1.3., 1.4.)</u> <u>Part II:</u> • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 2.1.6., 2.1.2.) • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System • Annex – Analysis of the results of surveys of students, graduates and employers. ***The experts report:*** Part I: • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (all criteria) – Assessment of requirement No.1. *"Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 2.[1] of the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system"*	***Self-assessment report:*** 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.2.). 2. Internal Quality Assurance System. ***The experts report:*** I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.2.). II. II. Internal Quality Assurance System
1.2. Design and approval of programme	***Self-assessment report:*** I. Compliance of the Study Programme with the Study Direction (criteria 1.1., 1.2., 1.3) III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (all criteria)	***Self-assessment report:*** Part II: 1. Indicators describing the Study Programme. 2. Actuality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.1., 2.1.3., 2.1.4.).	***Self-assessment report:*** Part II: • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.2.). Part III: • Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 3.1.2.) • Chapter 3.2. The Content of Studies and	***Self-assessment report:*** 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.3., 1.5.). 2. Internal Quality Assurance System (2.5., 2.6.). ***The experts report:***

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

	• Contracts of intent of the employers with regard to the provision of traineeships for students (if applicable). ***The experts report:*** III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (all criteria)		• Ethics, study regulations, etc.) ***The experts report:*** Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.5.) • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.3., 1.2.4.) Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 2.1.2.). • Chapter 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 2.2.1, 2.2.3., 2.2.4.). • Chapter 2.5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme.	
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	***Self-assessment report:*** III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (all criteria). * *If the study programme is to be implemented in the form of distance learning and/or in a branch of the HEI/ college, analysis is provided view of the form of distance learning and/or the branches.* Annexes, including: • Procedures/ regulations developed by the higher education institution/ college for the recognition of competences acquired outside formal education or through professional experience and learning outcomes achieved in	***Self-assessment report:*** Part II: Part II: 1. Indicators describing the Study Programme. 2. Topicality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.4.). ***The experts report:*** 1. Indicators describing the Study Programme (criteria 2., 3.)	***Self-assessment report:*** Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 2.1.4.) • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.4.). • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 2.3.8.). Part III: • Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 3.1.2., 3.1.4.). Annexes, including: • A sample of the diploma and its supplement to be issued for completing the study programme. ***The experts report:*** Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.4.). • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality	***Self-assessment report:*** 2. Internal Quality Assurance System (2.6.). Annexes: • Procedures for the recognition of competences acquired outside formal education or through professional experience and learning outcomes achieved in previous learning. • Sample of the diploma and its supplement to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme. • Document certifying that the Constitution of the higher education institution or By-Laws of the college have been approved.

	previous learning. **The experts report:** III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (all criteria).		Assurance System (criteria 1.2.4.). • Chapter 1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 1.5.3.) Part II.: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 2.1.2., 2.1.4). • Chapter 2.5. Assessment of the Compliance of the Study Programme	**The experts report:** II. Internal Quality Assurance System (6.) VIII. Compliance of the Activities of the Higher Education Institution/ College with the Provisions of Regulatory Enactments.
1.5. Teaching staff	**Self-assessment report:** II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (criterion 2.4.) IV. Teaching Staff (all criteria) **The experts report:** IV. Teaching Staff	**Self-assessment report:** Part II: 3. Rresources and provision (criteria 3.2.). **The experts report:** 3. Rresources and provision (requirement 2)	**Self-assessment report:** Part II: • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field 2.3.5., 2.3.6., 2.3.7.) • Chapter 2.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 2.4.2., 2.4.4., 2.4.5., 2.4.6.) Part III: • Chapter 3.4. Teaching Staff **The experts report:** Part I: • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System – Assessment of requirement No.1. • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 1.3.5., 1.3.6., 1.3.7.) • Chapter 1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 1.4.2., 1.4.4., 1.4.5., 1.4.6.). Part II: • Chapter 2.4. Teaching Staff.	**Self-assessment report:** 4. Teaching Staff 6. Cooperation and Internationalisation (6.3.) **The experts report:** IV. Teaching Staff VI. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 3)
1.6. Learning resources and student support	**Self-assessment report:** II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (all criteria) *If the study programme is to be implemented in the form of distance learning and/or in a branch of the HEI/ college, analysis is provided view of the*	**Self-assessment report:** Part II: 3. Rresources and provision (criteria 3.1.). **The experts report:** 3. Rresources and provision	**Self-assessment report:** Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 2.1.3.) • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (all criteria) Part III: • Chapter 3.3. Resources and Provision of the	**Self-assessment report:** 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.6.).3. Resources (3.4., 3.5.) 7. Activities of Students' Self-Governance

	form of distance learning and/or the branches. ***The experts report:*** II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme	(requirement 1)	Study Programme (all criteria). ***The experts report:*** Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.3). • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (all criteria) Part II: • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (all criteria) • Assessment of the requirement No.6 "*Compliance of the study provision, science provision (if applicable), informative provision (including library), material and technical provision and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes*".	***The experts report:*** I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (6) III. Resources (4., 5.) VII. Activities of Students' Self-Governance

1.7. Information management	***Self-assessment report:***
	
	II. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (criterion 2.1., 2.2., 2.4.)
	III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criterion 3.4., 3.5.).
	   * If the study programme is to be implemented in the form of distance learning and/or in a branch of the HEI/ college, analysis is provided view of the form of distance learning and/or the branches.
	
	The experts report:
	
	III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria
		Self-assessment report:
		
		Part II:
		2. Topicality of the study programme (criteria 2.1.4., 2.1.5.).
		
		The experts report:
		
		2. Topicality of the study programme.
		
		.
			Self-assessment report:
			
			Part I: criteria 1.1.
			Part II:
			• Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (2.1.2.);
			• Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.3., 2.2.4.)
			• Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field 2.3.2., 2.3.3., 2.3.4., 2.3.8.)
			• Chapter 2.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 2.4.5.)
			• Chapter 2.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 2.5.3.)
			Part III:
			• Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 3.1.3., 3.1.4.)
			• Chapter 3.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 3.2.6.)
			• Chapter 3.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (all criteria)
				Self-assessment report:
				
				1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.1., 1.3., 1.4., 1.5., 1.6., 1.7.).
				3. Resources (3.4., 3.5.).
				Annexes:
				  •Outcome of the surveys conducted among the students
				  •Outcome of the surveys conducted among the employers
				The experts report:
				
				I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1., 3., 4., 5., 6., 7.)
				III. Resources (4., 5.).

	3.4., 3.5.).		Annex: Analysis of the results of surveys of students, graduates and employers. ***The Experts report:*** Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.2). • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.3., 1.2.4.). • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 1.3.2., 1.3.3., 1.3.4., 1.3.8.). • Chapter 1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation (criteria 1.4.5.). • Chapter 1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation (criteria 1.5.3). Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 2.1.4.). • Chapter 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (criteria 2.2.6). • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme (criteria all criteria)	
1.8. Public information	***Self-assessment report:*** III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.4., 3.5.).	***Self-assessment report:*** Part II: 4. Implementation of the recommendation received in the licensing of the study programme (applicable if the recommendations provided are consistent to this standard). ***The experts report:*** 4. Implementation of the recommendations received during the licensing of the study	***Self-assessment report:*** Part II: • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.5.) ***The Experts report:*** Part I: • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.5.)	***Self-assessment report:*** 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.7.) ***The Experts report:*** I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (7.)

		programme.		
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	*Self-assessment report:* III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3.4., 3.5.). II.3. Involvement of the society in the design and continuous development of the programme II.4. Involvement of students in the design and continuous development of the programme *The experts report:* III. Study Content and the Mechanism for the Implementation of the Study Programme (criteria 3., 4).	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: 2. Topicality of the study programme *The experts report:* 2. Topicality of the study programme	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Management of the Study Field (2.1.5.); • Chapter 2.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 2.2.4.) • Chapter 2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 2.3.8.) Part III: • Chapter 3.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (criteria 3.1.1. 3.1.3.) • Chapter 3.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (all criteria) Annex: Analysis of the results of surveys of students, graduates and employers. *The experts report:* Part I: • Chapter 1.1. Management of the Study Field (criteria 1.1.5.). • Chapter 1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System (criteria 1.2.4.). • Chapter 1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field (criteria 1.3.8.). Part II: • Chapter 2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme (all criteria). • Chapter 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof (all criteria).	*Self-assessment report:* 1. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (1.5., 1.6.) 2. Internal Quality Assurance System (2.3., 2.5.,2.6.) *The experts report:* I. Aims, Objectives, and Management of the Higher Education Institution/ College (5., 6.) II. Internal Quality Assurance System (3., 5., 6.)
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	Within two years after starting the implementation of the study programme, the study programme must be included in the accredited study field.	*Self-assessment report:* Part II. 4. Implementation of the recommendation received in the licensing of the study programme (applicable if the	*Self-assessment report:* Part II: Chapter 2.6. Implementation of the Recommendations Received During the Previous Assessment Procedures (all criteria)	*Self-assessment report:* Information about the Results of Inspections Carried out by the State Education Quality Service and Deficiencies Eliminated in the

recommendations provided are consistent with quality systems and policy issues). ***The experts report:*** 4. Implementation of the recommendations received during the licensing of the study programme.	***The experts report:*** Part I: • Chapter 1.6. Implementation of the Recommendations Received During the Previous Assessment Procedures. • Assessment of the requirement No.4 *"Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided"*	Reported Period ***The experts report:*** VIII. Compliance of the Activities of the Higher Education Institution/ College with the Provisions of Regulatory Enactments

The Agency has also mapped the assessment procedure – accreditation of foreign study programmes abroad, although it is not active at the moment due to the high workload at the national level.

Table 8. Mapping of the standards used in the accreditation of foreign study programmes against the ESG.

ESG Part 1	Guidelines for self-evaluation reports by higher education institutions Guidelines for expert reports
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	1. Strategy, aims and programme management. • Aims of the study programme and their compliance with the strategic directions of the higher education institution • Structure for programme management, including the involved parties/ individuals and their responsibilities • Structure for student participation in programme management • SWOT (strengths – weaknesses – opportunities – threats) analysis of the study programme 9. Employability of graduates. • Coherence of study programme's goals with the labour market needs (regional, local) • Mechanisms for involvement of employers in the management and development of study programme
1.2. Design and approval of programme	1. Strategy, aims and programme management. • Economic and social grounds for establishing the study programme 2. Structure and content of the programme. • The content of study programme, including the compulsory and elective subjects • The relevance of the content of study programme and compliance with the needs of labour market • Interrelation of different study courses, the relation between the aims of study courses and the intended outcomes of study programme • The relation between the study courses and internship • The topics of graduate qualification works.

1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	4. Techniques and methods of educational activity. • Process for development and principles for application of teaching methods • Process for development and principles for application of student evaluation methods • Academic integrity principles, including the use of plagiarism detection tools • Implementation of student-centred approach in the learning and teaching process 8. Research work. • Directions of scientific research of teaching staff and students • Scientific activities performed by teaching staff and students (publications, participation in scientific projects 10. Student services. • Support mechanisms available for students, including the support provided during the study process, as well as career and psychological support by specifying the support to be provided to specific student groups (for instance, students from abroad, part-time students, distance-learning students, students with special needs, etc.)
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	1. Strategy, aims and programme management. • System and procedures for admission of students, including the mechanisms for recognition of prior learning 4. Techniques and methods of educational activity. • Mobility of students
1.5. Teaching staff	5. Teaching staff. • Procedures for attracting and/employing qualified teaching staff • Compliance of the qualification of teaching staff with conditions for implementation of study programme • Procedures for improving the qualification of teaching staff • Ratio between the academic and research workload of teaching staff • Mobility of teaching staff • Cooperation of teaching staff in implementation of the study programme 6. Cooperation and internationalisation. • System and procedures for attracting teaching staff and students from abroad 8. Research work. • Directions of scientific research of teaching staff and students • Scientific activities performed by teaching staff and students (publications, participation in scientific projects • Relation between research work and study process, including the description and assessment of the use of the outcomes in the study process
1.6. Learning resources and student support	3. Teaching and learning materials. • Process for development and updating of teaching materials • Relevance and quality of the available teaching materials • Availability of methodical guides for all disciplines and all types of activities – internships, course projects, diploma projects 4. Techniques and methods of educational activity. • Application of e-learning activity

	6. Cooperation and internationalisation. • Strategy for cooperation and internationalisation. • Cooperation with institutions in Ukraine and abroad (higher education institutions, municipalities, non-governmental organisations, scientific institutes), selection of cooperation partners 7. Resources. • The availability, quality and sustainability of financial resources • The availability, quality and sustainability of material and technical resources (premises, equipment etc.) • The availability, quality and sustainability of methodological and informative resources (library, databases, online tools (Moodle) etc.) • The use of information and communication technologies in implementation of the study programme 10. Student services. • Support mechanisms available for students, including the support provided during the study process, as well as career and psychological support by specifying the support to be provided to specific student groups (for instance, students from abroad, part-time students, distance-learning students, students with special needs, etc.)
1.7. Information management	1. Strategy, aims and programme management. • System for internal monitoring, development and review of study programme, including the system for receiving and using the feedback of stakeholders, the use of key-performance indicators (KPI) 9. Employability of graduates. • Statistics on employment of graduates, including the analysis of demand, workplace (field), average pay • Outcomes of surveys for employers and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme • Outcomes of surveys for graduates and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme
1.8. Public information	7. Resources. • The availability of public information on the study programme
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	1.Strategy, aims and programme management. • System for internal monitoring, development and review of study programme, including the system for receiving and using the feedback of stakeholders, the use of key-performance indicators (KPI) 9. Employability of graduates. • Outcomes of surveys for employers and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme • Outcomes of surveys for graduates and the use of these outcomes for improvement of the content and quality of study programme
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	Accreditation of foreign study programmes ends with a formal decision on accreditation term. The accreditation certificate is awarded for a defined period, thus imposing that accreditation has to be repeated after this period.

6.2. Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose [ESG 2.2]

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.

External evaluation procedures conducted by the Agency are defined by national regulatory framework. However, the procedures are designed and elaborated in a way that they are fit for purpose and meet the set goals.

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

All external evaluation procedures have a clear goal and purpose, and complement each other by emphasising certain quality elements of HEIs. Taken together, the procedures aim to facilitate the overall development and improvement of quality of HEIs. All assessment procedures are performed in accordance with the national legislation, international trends and with the respect to the ESG.

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 (short cycle) professional higher education study programmes the experts group include practitioners rather than highly qualified scientists. Also, when assessing the quality of science and research in a college or a first level (short cycle) professional higher education study programme, the experts group focuses more on the applied research rather than on science.

The guidelines for the preparation of documents are based on equal principles for all core assessment procedures, gradually deepening analysis that HEIs should perform. For example: during licencing of the new study programme HEI should describe their resources for the implementation of the study programme, as well as the expected number of students and financial recourses, but during assessment of study field HEI should analyse their approaches and procedures for ensuring necessary recourses (on study field level) and analyse whether the number of students and the provided resources are sufficient to ensure a qualitative study process and the sustainability of the programme (on study programmes level).

Relation between the assessment procedures:

- licensing of study programmes is the initial (ex-ante) assessment mandatory for all new study programmes. It considers the main reasons for establishing the study programme, compliance of the study programme with study field, resources and provision of the study programme, study content and the mechanism for the implementation of the study programme, teaching staff, compliance of the study programme with the provisions of regulatory enactments;

- assessment and accreditation of the study field is the main quality assurance procedure and at the moment the only cyclical quality assurance procedure. The procedure includes assessment of a number of aspects – both on the level of the study field (management of the study field, including strategy, efficiency of the internal quality assurance system, general

provision of resources, scientific research and artistic creation, cooperation and internationalisation and implementation of the recommendations received during the previous assessment procedures) and on the level of individual study programmes (structure and indicators describing study programme, content of studies and implementation thereof, specific resources and provision for study programme, teaching staff and compliance of the study programme with the provisions of regulatory enactments);

- accreditation 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 only, but extra-ordinary accreditation might be initiated by the MoES for any HEI. Some of the elements of the procedure overlap with the assessment of the study fields, especially for the institutions which implement only one study field. The complexity of the assessment is related to the national context. There is a significant number of HEIs in Latvia and requirements for establishing a new institution are strict, therefore the establishment of new institution is carefully considered and assessed thoroughly. As mentioned above, there are plans to introduce cyclical assessment of HEIs starting from 2025. In this case methodology of institutional accreditation will be revised, including best practices from methodologies and lessons learned from assessment and accreditations of study fields;

- assessment of substantial changes in study field (study programmes) is a technical, non-cyclical procedure that is done between two cyclical assessments and performed on the request of a HEI. In most cases changes in study field 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 2.3. of the Cabinet Regulation No. 793. 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 procedures (licensing of study programmes, assessment and accreditation of the study field, assessment of HEI). The purpose of this procedure is to manage the provision and provide continuous validation of the significant changes, however the procedure was not initially designed to follow the ESG framework.

- inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field is non-cyclical procedure performed on the request of a HEI, following requirement set in Cabinet regulation No. 793, Paragraph 2.5. In compliance with the requirements set for this procedure, the Agency developed guidelines and methodology for the implementation of this procedure emphasizing that this procedure is as a sequential continuation of the study programme licensing procedure, where the progress is assessed, meaning that experts assess whether HEI intentions described during the creation and licensing of the study programme are fulfilled.

The methodology is developed in the way that HEI report/application made within this procedure further can be integrated into the development of the self-assessment report of the study field, as the guidelines are created in accordance with the criteria that are also requested as part of the assessment procedure of the study field.

However, HEIs could skip this procedure, if in a certain period after the licensing of the study programme, the HEI is planning to undergo the assessment of the study field, in this case the programme will be assessed within study field assessment and accreditation.

As it is planned to move to cyclical institutional accreditation after the completion of ongoing cycle of study field assessment and accreditation, the "*inclusion of licenced study programme on the accreditation form of a study field*" exists as a temporary solution, rather than a comprehensive quality assurance procedure.

- assessment and accreditation of study programmes abroad is developed as a demand form higher education institutions abroad. The procedure includes assessment of study programmes were jurisdiction allows such type of assessment. As the previous assessments were conducted in Ukraine only, the Agency always communicated with national agency in order to understand better the national context and national legislation. In addition, local experts were involved in the experts group.

The Agency systematically collects and analyses feedback about the assessment procedures and makes sure that added value of assessment and the ways how the procedures are conducted support HEIs for continuous quality improvement. Thus, comparing surveys results analysed in 2017 and 2022, it can be concluded that both HEIs and experts appreciate changes and improvements initiated by the Agency.

The figure 8 demonstrates that the quality of support mechanisms for the experts and HEI – guidelines, seminars, consultations - has improved. Both experts and HEIs confirm that the Agency is considering recommendations provided by all involved stakeholders.

Figure 8. Quality of the report and submitted documents for licensing in 2017 and 2021 (average value, where 1 – "do not agree", 2 – "rather do not agree", 3 – "rather agree", 4 – "agree").
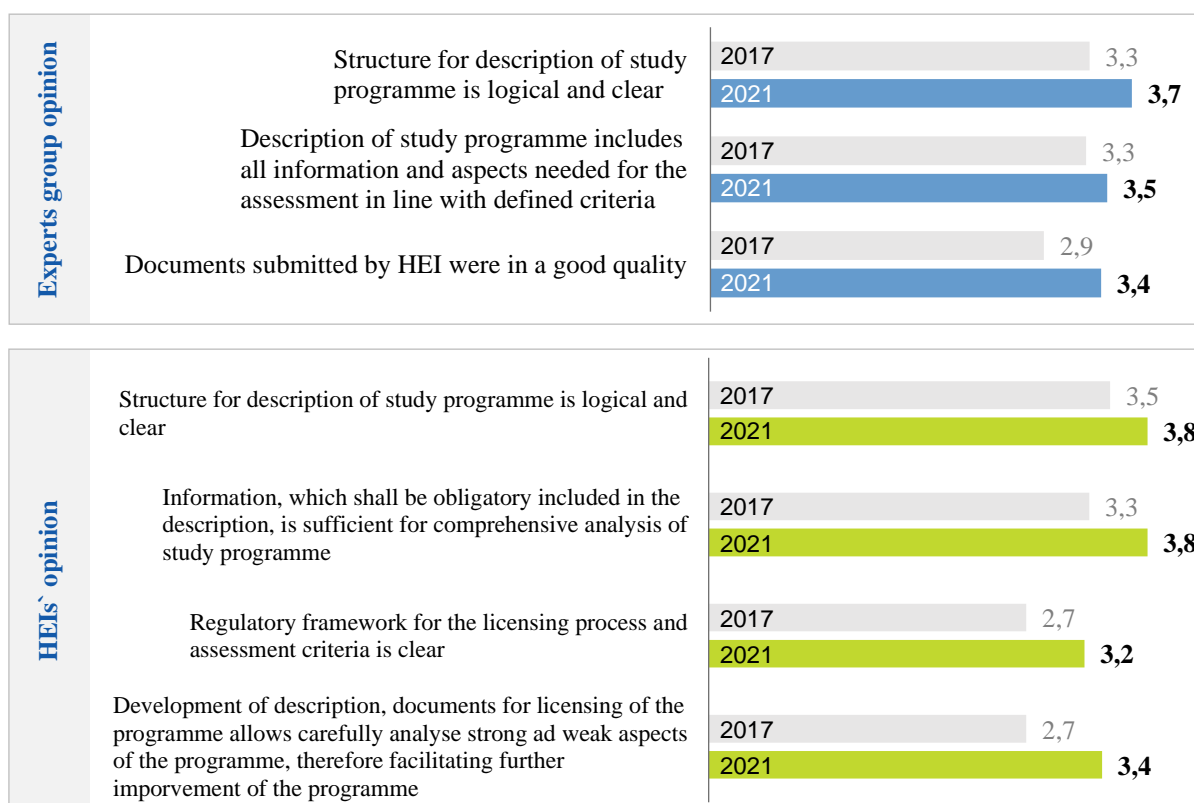
The Agency regularly monitors changes in the external regulatory framework to ensure that the changes are in line with ESG. For example, taking into account the initial experience within the accreditation procedure of the study fields, in 2018 amendments in the Law on Higher Education Institutions were approved. The amendments determined that the stages of the study field assessment and accreditation process are divided into two parts, where assessment process can be conducted by any EQAR agency, but accreditation part (decision-making) always is under the competence of SQC. Also, considering these amendments, the approach to the organisation of the assessment and accreditation processes were revised, among other things, more time was ensured for the assessment experts work (before and after site visit) and the SQC has more time to get acquainted with the accreditation documents, i.e. methods to examine issues and making decisions was changed. In

addition, HEIs now have got more time to prepare a progress report regarding the implementation of the recommendations after the study field assessment, which positively impacts the decision-making process.

6.3. Implementing Processes [ESG 2.3]

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.*

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

The Agency has developed a set of methodologies for core assessment procedures:
- Methodology for Organising the Assessment of Higher Education Institutions and Colleges;
- Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes
- Methodology for the Assessment and Accreditation of Study Fields.

The Agency developed a corresponding set of guidelines for each of the procedure:
- For assessing higher education institutions and colleges:
  - The Guidelines for the Preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Higher Education Institutions/ Colleges;
  - The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Opinion by the Experts Group on the Assessment of the HEI.
- For licensing of study programmes:
  - The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Description of a Study Programme;
  - The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Report by the Experts on the Assessment of a Study Programme.
- For assessing and accreditation of the study field:
  - The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Self-Assessment Report of a Study Field (updated on 20.08.2021., in force for applications submitted from 20.09.2021.);
  - The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Opinion by the Expert Group on the Assessment of a Study Field (updated on 20.08.2021., in force for applications submitted from 20.09.2021.).

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.

All the methodologies and guidelines are published and available on the website of the Agency[61].

For assessment and accreditation of study programmes abroad there is a set of documents

The main principles defined by the Agency state that everyone involved in the assessment procedure has to abide by being unbiased and fact based, neutral, respectful towards the persons involved in the assessment process, confidential and cooperative. This applies not only to the staff of the Agency but

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[61] AIKA Internal Rules and Regulations: https://www.aika.lv/en/laws-and-regulations-publications/internal-rules-and-regulations/

also to the governing and decision-making bodies, experts and other individuals involved in the activities of the Agency.

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;
- 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;
- to ensure a uniform approach, if the procedure is organised by a new assessment coordinator, an experienced colleague is involved to ensure a uniform approach to the assessment procedures;
- for assessment of study fields using E-platform, where information is collected and included on an equal basis. E-platform training and methodological and technical support is provided to HEIs.

In its assessment procedures, the Agency adheres to the following phases stipulated by the ESG which are described in detail further:
1. Self-assessment
2. Site visit
3. Experts report
4. Decision-making
5. Publication of outcomes
6. Follow-up

Self-assessment report

The HEIs are required to submit an application and a self-assessment report or an equivalent document for all assessment procedures. The documents are submitted in Latvia, but for the procedures - accreditation and assessment of study fields, accreditation of HEI and inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form – translation in English is submitted as well.

The templates of the self-assessment report for the licensing, accreditation and assessment of study fields and accreditation of HEI and inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form are developed by the Agency and are available on the website of the Agency. The same is for accreditation of foreign study programmes abroad.

For the assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields there is no template because the information that is relevant for assessing changes differs depending on the nature of changes. The HEIs are required to describe the current situation and the initiated changes, including justification and relevant annexes, if needed.

For the assessment of the study field, following the Cabinet Regulation No.793, one additional step should be taken – before HEI submits application for study field assessment, the Agency and HEI should sign contract for assessment of specific study field, as HEI has option to choose any EQAR agency. From the perspective of the Agency, this step allows to balance and plan the workload of the Agency.

After receiving the self-assessment report (and/or documents), the Agency examines the information provided and, if necessary, requires to clarify or supplement the information, in case the guidelines are not followed.

Site visit

For all 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 (additional information in the SAR section 6.4). Considering the circumstances caused by the Covid-19, amendments to the assessment procedure methodologies were made in 2020, defining that assessment visits can be organized in different ways – on-site, fully or partially remotely.

Usually the length of site visit is 2 - 5 days depending on the number of programmes in the study field. For licensing of a new study programmes the usual site visit is 1 day. During site visits there are meetings with the management of the HEI, and/or the respective department, the team that has prepared the Self-Assessment Report, the teaching staff, students, graduates, and the representatives of the employers and/or professional organisations.

Before each assessment visit, the Agency communicated and agreed with HEI and expert group the way of assessment visit. Also, in the methodologies were incorporated requirements for both HEI and expert group for having fully or partially remote visit. In addition, the Agency organised remote meeting with HEIs before the site visit in order to check whether requirements for having fully or partially remote visit are clear and the quality of technical equipment is sufficient.

The working language is Latvian, but for the procedures - accreditation and assessment of study fields, accreditation of HEI and inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form – it is English. If necessary, HEIs could invite interpreter that shall be agreed with the Agency in advance.

Experts report

In all procedures the experts draft a report, which is sent to HEI before taking the decision. The experts` reports are prepared in Latvian in case of licensing of study programme and assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields, but for the procedures - accreditation and assessment of study fields, accreditation of HEI and inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form – it is English. For accreditation of study programmes abroad experts report and working language is English.

In the case of accreditation and assessment of study fields and accreditation of HEIs, as well as for accreditation of foreign study programmes, the report is sent to the HEIs for identifying factual errors and the experts group has to review them and may amend the report, if agreed with provided comments.

In case of licensing, assessment of changes in study fields (if expert is involved) and inclusion of licensed study programme in the study field there is no such procedure because the reports are more compact and technical, however the reports are sent to HEI before the decision-taking, so HEIs could react and express their opinion in written way before the decision making or in oral during the SQC meeting.

In case of negative conclusion of the experts' group, HEI has rights to prepare arguments and evidence (if any) for the SQC and present them at the SQC meeting or sent in advance in written, however the decision is taken based on the actual evidence.

Decision making process

The Agency acts as the Secretariat for the SQC that takes decisions on all assessment procedures at national level. The decision on the accreditation of HEI is taken by the CHE, which will be changed from 2025 when decision making on the accreditation of HEI will be under the competence of SQC.

For decision-making on accreditation of foreign study programmes another commission is in place – Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes.

Considering that the Agency is aware of the issues to which SQC pays increased attention, in the event that a lack of information is detected before the meeting, the Agency asks the HEI to submit or clarify the missing information.

In all procedures the HEI representatives are invited to attend the SQC meeting when the decision is taken.

Follow-up activities

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

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

The Agency has developed and published a template for HEI for providing information on follow up activities. This template should be used by HEI as part of the preparation of the self-assessment report during the study field assessment procedure and as part of follow-up activities after the decision on the accreditation of the study field has been made. It is recommended to use this template already before the decision when reporting about the activities planned/ already taken. Template includes following sections: recommendation by the expert group, activity, outcomes to be achieved, term of implementation, results. This template should also be used by HEIs as part of the preparation of the self-assessment report during the study field assessment procedure and as part of follow-up activities after the decision on the accreditation of the study field has been made. Using a unified approach ensures that HEI could just supplement already prepared information, track their progress and, in case there is staff rotation at HEIs, helps to ensure continuity of information.

If strong recommendations are given within the framework of the assessment procedures and the information regarding recommendations implementation must be sent to the Agency within a short period of time, the assessment coordinators monitor that the HEI submits the necessary information and it is then forwarded to the SQC.

In other cases, the implementation of recommendations is assessed in the next study field assessment procedure as one of the assessment criteria.

In case of licensing the follow-up procedure is integrated in the assessment and accreditation of study fields 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 field. When submitting the application and self-assessment report for the accreditation of study field, 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 field).

In case of assessment of substantial changes, those are either approved or not. Usually there are no additional recommendations, but, in case there are some, they are addressed during the assessment and accreditation of study field, so the follow-up procedure is integrated in the accreditation of study fields follow-up procedure.

In case of accreditation of study field, taking into account that accreditation process could be two or six years, separate follow-up procedure is applied. To assure that HEI get acquainted with the follow-up activities which should to be performed, they are described within Methodology for the Assessment and Accreditation of Study Fields (chapter No. 4 "Follow-Up Activities"). It is stated that:

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

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

The follow-up approach for accreditation of foreign study programmes abroad is based on the model already implemented for national procedures. HEI is required to report on implementation of expert recommendations already before Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes takes decision. The Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes has the mandate to request a further follow-up within a certain period of time. If the Agency is selected for the next accreditation, the HEI would be requested to provide a full report on implementation of the recommendations.

6.4. Peer-Review Experts [ESG 2.4]

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 field and inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field due to being technical procedures).

Table 9. Composition of the Experts Groups.

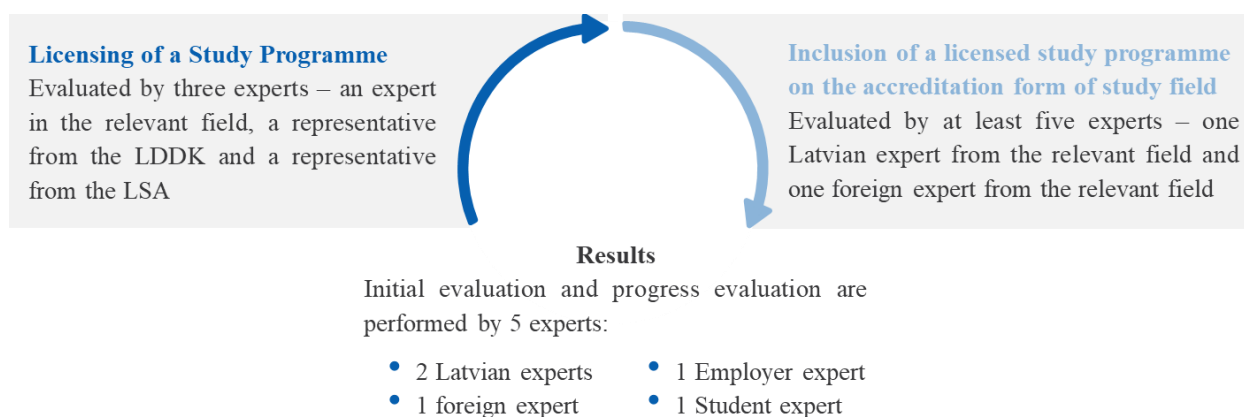| Type of assessment	Number of experts	Representatives and a number of them	Number of foreign experts	Observer(s)* (could be nominated)
Accreditation of HEI	7	LSA – 1	At least 2	– by the Student Union of Latvia – the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees and the CHE
Accreditation and Assessment of a study field	At least 5	LSA – 1 LDDK – 1	At least 2	– by the Student Union of Latvia – the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees and the SQC

Licensing of a study programme	3	LSA – 1 LDDK – 1	0	– by the Student Union of Latvia – Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees
Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field	2	–	1	–
Assessment of feasibility on changes in study field (i.e.study programme)	1	–	0	–
Accreditation of foreign study programmes abroad	At least 4 for one study programme	One panel member should represent students and another one the labour market but no nominations from certain organisations are required	At least 2 have to be external to the country where the HEI is based	-

*The possibility to participate in assessment procedure as an observer is mostly perceived as a possibility to get acquainted with procedure before becoming an expert. For example, the Student Union of Latvia often uses this opportunity to nominate a student observer to train the future student experts. The Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees usually nominates their staff members (experts in the higher education sector) and it is a possibility for them to get acquainted with the current issues of education and science employees in higher education. Observers act in accordance with the Rules of Procedure for Observers[62]

It should be noted that considering the nature of the procedure – inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field, it is not designed as stand-alone procedure fully covering the ESG Part 2. The fact that it is not stand-alone quality assurance procedure is also confirmed by its methodology which has been designed in the way that it addresses only those issues that could not be covered by "licensing of study programmes" and would otherwise be covered by "assessment/ accreditation of study fields". It only covers the ESG Part 2 in combination with another related procedure – licensing of study programme or accreditation of study field. The main purpose of which to review the progress since the programme licensing, therefore, 2 procedures – licensing of a study programme and inclusion of a licensed study programme, include 5 experts in total, as it is demonstrated below, in Figure 9.

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[62] Rules of Procedure for Observers, http://aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Noverotaju-dalibas-kartiba-novertesanas-proceduras_2019.pdf (in Latvian)

*Figure 9. Composition of experts in two consecutive procedures.*

Licensing of a Study Programme
Evaluated by three experts – an expert in the relevant field, a representative from the LDDK and a representative from the LSA

Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field
Evaluated by at least five experts – one Latvian expert from the relevant field and one foreign expert from the relevant field

Results
Initial evaluation and progress evaluation are performed by 5 experts:

- 2 Latvian experts
- 1 foreign expert
- 1 Employer expert
- 1 Student expert

During the reported period 1179 external experts were involved in the assessment procedures.

Table 10. Experts involved in assessment procedures 2018 – 2022 (by assessment procedures)

Experts, involved in assessment procedures	
Licensing of a study programme	432
Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e.study programmes)	113
Accreditation and Assessment of study fields	546
Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field	60
Accreditation of a HEI	7
Accreditation of study programmes abroad	21
Total	**1179**

In three of the assessment procedures (accreditation and assessment of a study field, inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field and assessment of a HEI), the Agency involves international experts. The proportion of local and international experts has been well balanced. Currently 41% of the experts involved in assessment procedures between 2018 and 2022 have been from abroad. The Figure 10 shows the number of foreign experts involved in the assessment procedures.

Figure 10. Foreign experts involved in assessment procedures organised by the Agency in 2018-2022 (till October 2022).
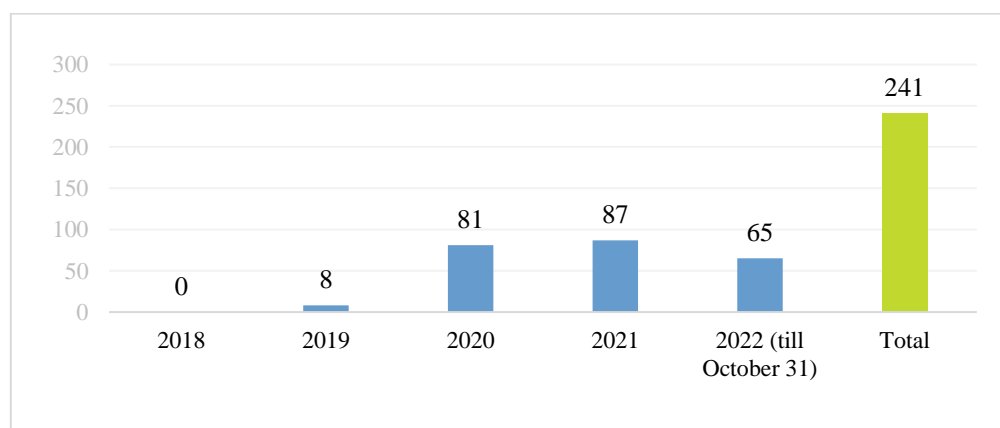
The procedure for selecting experts for a particular assessment procedure and the competencies that must be covered by the experts group are defined in the Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts[63]. The Agency has developed a set of competencies that must be covered by each experts group, including that expert has experience in the internal quality assurance issues or in the assessment of higher education and expert is competent in the field of study programme (study field) under assessment. In addition such aspects as the type of HEI, the specific features of study programme (e.g. distance learning), level of study programme, the assessment type (initial or cyclical assessment) are taken into consideration. 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 field and HEIs, the Agency tries to include one expert who has participated in the previous assessment, if possible.

All experts are selected by the Agency, except those who are delegated by LSA and/or LDDK. The 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 Agency approves the experts' groups and appoints the group chair and secretary in case of accreditation of study fields and evaluation of HEI. The chair is responsible for managing the work of the expert's group whereas the secretary is responsible for the joint report. Both roles can be taken by any member of the experts' group (also student or employer) if the specific criteria are met. Each experts group is supported by a staff member of the Agency– assessment coordinator who is not a member of the experts' group.

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 on E-platform with the possibility to update information and select experts according to certain criteria.

Experts data base is an integral part of Agency`s developed e-platform. Experts' data included in the previous data base were transferred to E-platform and experts were informed about the changes and invited to update information in their profile or to make any other amendments, also to delete their profile if they want. Currently there are 1,253 experts registered in the system, from which 909 have been evaluated and approved as protentional experts to be assigned to procedures. The local and foreign expert distribution is that 45% of experts are local and 55% of them are foreign experts from different countries.

For attracting new assessment experts, the Agency launches a call at the website of the Agency and sending invitations to stakeholder organisations and HEIs. For international experts Agency launches a call which is published on the ENQA and/or CEENQA website.

Every individual interested in assessment procedures can apply for inclusion in the database by registering in E-platform and 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 database of the Agency 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. There are 1,253 experts registered in the system, from which 909 have been evaluated and approved as protentional experts to be

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[63] Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts, approved on 22 July 2019, https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Ekspertu_atlases_kriteriji_un_principi_2019.pdf

assigned to procedures. The local and foreign expert distribution is that 45% of experts are local and 55% of them are foreigners from different countries.

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 database. It is used for the future assessment procedures, in order to create experts' groups that are professional, objective and capable to work together.

This database 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 and international experts included in the database.

Training before the on-site assessment visit to the HEI is organised and held by the staff of the Agency. Due to pandemic Covid-19 the training method is changed and now it consists of two parts:
- the first meeting of experts group is held online and is more introductive and general;
- the second meeting 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. This training could be held in different ways – online, face-to-face or hybrid mode depending on the circumstances at certain period.

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 into 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.

Such seminars were organised in 2018, 2021 and 2022, especially inviting experts who correspond to the study fields to be assessed within accreditation period. Exception was in 2019 when the Agency intensively worked with HEI and their understanding of assessment procedures, especially due to the fact that new approach was introduced for assessment of study fields, and in 2020 when several additional activities were carried out to mitigate the risks caused by Covid-19. However, to ensure the continuity of training, in 2020, in cooperation with LSA, the expert seminar was organised specifically for student experts with special emphasis on representation and evaluation of student interests.

It is worth to note that expert trainings are widely attended, and important aspect is that within the framework of each seminar, LDDK and LSA are also specially addressed, inviting them to distribute

information to the representatives of employers and students, which allows to ensure the participation of these representatives in the seminars as well.

The Agency is aware of a significant benefit from such seminars, including strengthening the experts' interest to take part in assessment procedures, therefore, the Agency is planning to continue to organise such seminars in the future as well.

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 field, 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 field, 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 field, 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 considers 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.

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 that increase 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 or chair of the experts group.

6.5. Criteria for Outcomes [ESG 2.5]

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, inclusion of licensed study programme in accreditation form of study field, accreditation and assessment of study fields and assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields are taken by the SQC. Since 2019 there is one decision-making body instead of two previous commissions worked till the end of 2018.
- decisions on accreditation of HEI are taken by the Council of Higher Education. Starting from 2025 this will be under the competence of SQC (it is already approved by the Law on Higher Education Institutions).
- Decisions of accreditation of foreign study programmes are taken by the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes.

Depending on each quality assessment procedure there are different possible outcomes.
- For the licensing of the study programme the programme can be either licensed or not. Prerequisites for taking decision are listed on Cabinet regulations No. 795 and the criteria for refusing the license are set in the Law on Higher Education Institutions.
- For accreditation and assessment of the study fields the decision can be either refusal of accreditation or accreditation for one of the two terms – 2 or 6 years. Prerequisites for taking decision are set in Cabinet Regulations No 793 and the criteria for refusing accreditation are set in the Law on Higher Education Institutions.
- For inclusion of licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field the possible decisions can be to include it or not and study programme is assessed as excellent, good, average or poor. Prerequisites for taking decision are set in Cabinet Regulations No 793.
- For assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields the possible decisions can be to approve or not to approve the changes. Prerequisites for taking decision are set in Cabinet Regulations No 793 and 795.
- 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 794 and the criteria for refusing accreditation are set in the Law on Higher Education Institutions.
- For accreditation of foreign study programmes the possible decisions can be the refusal of accreditation or accreditation for 2 or 6 years. The prerequisites for taking decision are set in the Rules of Procedure of Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes.

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 website of the Agency both in Latvian and English.

The assessment criteria are based on such documents as the Law on Higher Education Institutions, 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 follow them. The templates of the self-assessment reports are aligned with the templates of 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 may 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 fields 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.

Decision-Making Criteria

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

The decision is made considering the following:
- the information submitted by the HEIs (the self-assessment reports prepared by the HEIs and additional information requested by the experts' group and the Agency);
- the joint assessment report prepared by the experts' group;
- the opinion of certified institutions in case of regulated professions.

The decisions taken by the SQC 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 agenda of the SQC 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 website of the Agency, at least 5 working days before the meeting. Outcomes of the decisions are published on the E-platform, in case of accreditation of foreign study programmes at the website of the Agency.

The decision-making criteria for the accreditation of foreign study programmes abroad are set in the Guidelines for accreditation of foreign study programmes and Rules of Procedure for the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes.

Table 11. Outcomes of the assessment procedures in 2018 – 2022

	2018	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022 (till 31 October)*
Licensing of study programme	22	12	60	37	13*

Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e.study programmes)	18	25	37	19	14
Inclusion of a licensed programme	0	0	0	0	30
Accreditation and assessment of study fields	0	4	2	54**	30***
Accreditation of HEI	0	0	1	0	0

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

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

6.6. Reporting [ESG 2.6]

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 fields. The current assessment report templates have been improved based on the received feedback from the HEIs and the experts.

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 website of the Agency www.aika.lv;
- the information about all HEIs operating in Latvia and all study fields and study programmes offered by them as well as the results of the current and former assessment procedures is available on the E-platform at https://eplatforma.aika.lv/

Till 2019 the Study Direction Register 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 2019 the E-platform was launched and all information from the Study Direction Register was transferred to the E-platform automatically. All HEIs were invited to check whether data transferring regarding their own institution was correct and in some cases the data was amended.

E-platform public part has several options for searching any study field, programme or HEI, to find out data on accreditation or licensing. The information could be searched by different filters, for example, by level of programme, by title, by ISCED code, by language, by HEI or by study field etc.

Information is published in two languages – Latvian and English, both positive and negative decisions.

E-platform also includes self-assessment reports and expert reports (to the procedures conducted by the Agency).

The experts' reports are always published together with the information on the decision regarding accreditation and assessment of a study field, accreditation of a HEI, licensing of a new study programme, inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field and assessment of feasibility on changes in the study field.

For easier access for the English-speaking audience this information is also available through the website www.aika.lv

E-platform
up-to-date information about study programmes in Latvia

If the assessment was done by the international experts' group, the self-assessment reports and joint reports of experts are in English, in other cases in Latvian as only Latvian experts are involved in licensing of study programmes and assessing changes to a study field.

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

It should be noted that E-platform covers national scope of higher education system, meaning that there is information only on HEIs in Latvia and their programmes.

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

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

6.7. Complaints and Appeals [ESG 2.7]

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 an Appeal Commission has been established and a specific Appeals Procedure has been designed.

Complaints Process

The rights to submit complaints regarding the process of assessment is indicated in the assessment methodologies, stating that if, during the assessment process, the assessment experts or HEI detect any violation in the assessment process or unethical conduct of the parties involved in the assessment process, a complaint may be expressed, firstly, to the assessment coordinator, or it could be directly submitted in written to the Agency.

There were some cases, when HEI made a call to the Head of respective unit of the Agency or to the Head of Agency to express their worries or clarify the process. If complaint is submitted in written, the written answer is prepared as well. Until now, no cases of received written complaints have been registered.

As it is mentioned the SAR section 6.4 HEI has right to object the approved experts by submitting justified arguments. There have been some cases of HEI objecting to the approved experts. According to the procedure justification of objection is examined by the Agency, i.e. by assessment coordinator, Head of Quality Assessment Unit and a lawyer and approved by the Head of the Agency. In some cases, the Agency agreed with provided justification in order to avoid potential conflict of interest and ensure open and transparent process of assessment. However, in some cases the Agency found that justification did not provide clear and sufficient arguments, therefore objected expert was not replaced. In such cases additional attention is paid to the experts` trainings in order to emphasize the principles of the experts' work. In both cases, the Agency provides arguments for replacement or rejection of replacement that are sent to HEI.

The Process of appeals

According to the Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Cabinet regulations each decision (except about accreditation of HEI) can be appealed, by sending appeal to the Appeal Commission. The Appeals Commission reviews the justification of appeal and issue its decision, and the decision of the Appeal Commission can be disputed in the court in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Law.

An independent Appeals Commission reviews all types of assessments performed by the Agency (except accreditation of HEI, where is a different appeal procedure at the moment). Due to the legislative changes, which state that decision on the accreditation of HEI is transferred from the Council of Higher Education to the SQC, the appeals will be under the competence of this Appeals Commission as well.

The Appeals Commission consists of four members, including the chair of the commission. The requirements for members of Appeals Commission are set in the Law on HEIs, but the criteria and selection procedure are developed by the Agency.

In the commission there are two experts in higher education area and two experts with higher education in legal sciences and professional experience in the administrative process, who apply through open call and are approved by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council. Appeals Commission[64] is approved for the term of 2 years and acts in accordance with the Rules of Procedures[65].

Since the preparation of the previous self-evaluation report in 2018 there have been three cases of appeal. In December 2021 the HEI partially appealed the decision of the SQC, who made a decision to accredit study field "Management, administration and real estate management" for the term of two years. It was appealed to the part of decision and it was required to issue a more favourable administrative act, i.e. accreditation for the term of six years. After reviewing all available documents and regulatory enactments, the Appeal Commission concluded that the SQC has the right and obligation, upon finding obvious inconsistencies in the content of the study programme, to make an appropriate decision. Therefore, it was decided to keep the SQC decision in force, however the decision was justified by substantive justification.

At the moment, the decision of the Appeal Commission is contested to the court in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Law. The court (first instance) has not yet considered the administrative case and has not issued a verdict. It should be noted that this is the first case when accreditation decision is contested in the court.

In March 2022 the other HEI partially appealed the decision of the SQC. The SQC accredited the study field "Economics" for the term of two years. It was appealed against the part of decision and it was required the Appeal Commission to issue a more favourable administrative act, i.e. accreditation

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[64] Information on the Appeals Commission, https://www.aika.lv/en/aika-about/appeals-committee/
[65] The Rules of Procedure of the Appeals Commission, https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Apelacijas_komisijas_nolikums.pdf (in Latvian)

for the term of six years. After reviewing all available documents and regulatory enactments, the Appeal Commission concluded that the SQC has the right and obligation, upon finding obvious inconsistencies in the content of the study programme, to make an appropriate decision. The appeal was reviewed and the decision was to keep the SQC decision in force, however the decision was justified by substantive justification. The last decision was not contested, therefore the decision of the Appeal Commission has entered into force.

In June 2022 the same HEI partially appealed the decision of the SQC. The SQC accredited the study field "Law" for the term of two years. It was appealed against the part of decision by which it was decided to refuse the right to implement two study programmes in English. After reviewing all available documents and regulatory enactments, the Appeal Commission concluded that this case is not under Law on HEIs (Section 57) where rights to implement study programmes in the European Union languages are prescribed, therefore the decision was to keep the decision of the SQC in force, however the decision was justified by substantive justification. At the time of preparation of this self-evaluation, the last decision has not been contested, however, the decision of the Appeal Commission has not yet entered into force.

Regarding the accreditation of study programmes abroad the following procedure is in place. The written contract that is concluded between AIC and HEI stipulates the possibilities for complaints about procedural issues (composition of the expert group, adhering to deadlines etc.) as well as the possibility to contest the final outcome. The formal outcome of the assessment procedure enters into force on the meeting of the Accreditation Commission for Foreign Study Programmes when it is announced to the higher education institution can be contested to the appeals committee for foreign study programmes. It can be contested by submitting an appeal to the appeals committee for foreign study programme within one month after the decision has entered into force. This appeals committee consists of three members, approved by the chairperson of AIC based on the selection conducted by the Agency. There have been no cases of appeals to the final outcome so far and the deadline for submitting an appeal has expired for all completed assessment procedures. Also, as it was mentioned before in the SAR, the Agency does not accept the new assessment procedures from abroad anymore.

7. INFORMATION AND OPINION OF STAKEHOLDERS

The Agency has identified stakeholders that support its strategy and are aiming to improve quality of higher education. The main Agency`s stakeholders are higher education institutions, policy makers such as MoES and other line ministries, students and such organisations as LSA, LDDK, Rectors` Council, Latvian Council of Science, assessment experts, Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees, Council of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and others. Representatives of relevant stakeholders participate in the work of various bodies of the Agency, thus ensuring their continuous and active participation in all processes and contribution to the enhancement of quality assurance activities.

The Agency considers as extremely important the opinion of stakeholders, therefore continuous dialogue with stakeholders is in place. In addition, the feedback about the conducted assessment procedures has been regularly collected and analysed. The feedback is collected through an online survey carried out after the assessment procedure is completed. After receiving feedback, the results of the surveys are analysed and improvements are made to the activities of the Agency, 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.

Comparing the results of surveys in 2017 and 2021 it is concluded that the work of the Agency is at the same high level (average assessment is between 3,69 and 3,92 out of 4 points). The most highly evaluated aspect is effective organisation of communication process among all involved parties (3,92), and that the staff of the Agency has managed to ensure clear information/answers (3,85). The Agency highly appreciates provided feedback, which means that the Agency during the last 5 years has been performing its functions professionally and with high responsibility.

According to the feedback provided by HEIs, seminars and other events organised by Agency are considered as very valuable, providing comprehensive and clear information, broader perspectives and certainly helps to be prepared for assessments. In addition to the yearly seminars on assessment procedures, Agency has organised various seminars on topical issues, for instance, "The role of strategic partnership in improving the quality of higher education", "Increasing the qualifications of academic staff: challenges and experiences", "International experience in the implementation of institutional accreditation as a cyclical assessment procedure" etc., where local and international speakers were invited. Also for methodological support Agency has officially translated some publications[66] in Latvian, such as "European Toolkit for Internal Quality Management in Competence-Based Higher Education", "Enhancing quality: from policy to practice" and "Writing and using learning outcomes: a practical guide" (the author Declan Kennedy also conducted seminars for HEIs in Latvia).

For the purpose to receive stakeholder opinion on the achievement of strategic directions set for the period 2017-2022, the Agency conducted a survey in the first half of 2022. Provided feedback gives the Agency the confidence that its work is highly evaluated and supported. As it was identified by this survey the majority of stakeholder considers the Agency as a highly recognised institution.

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[66] Agency`s publications and articles: https://www.aika.lv/en/laws-and-regulations-publications/publications-articles/

Figure 11. Please evaluate AIKA as a recognised institution in the environment of higher education, in society as a whole and in the international environment.".
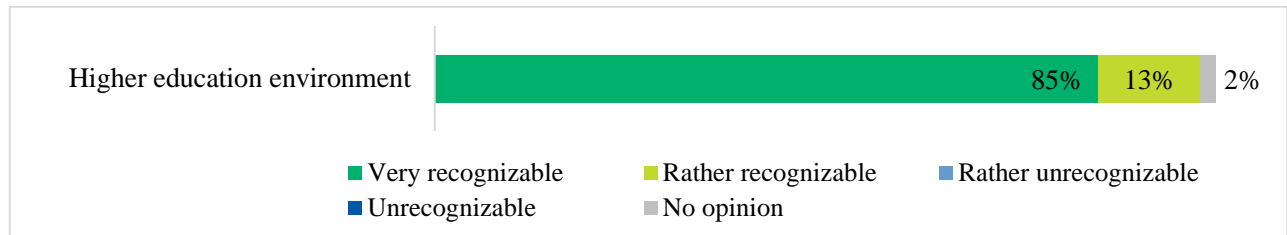
Also stakeholders were asked to assess the achievement of strategic objectives of the Agency in the previous period. There are some examples of provided feedback, which clearly demonstrate that the Agency has gained trust and respect of all stakeholders and is considered as a competent body in quality assurance issues in Latvia. The Agency appreciates such high rating and hopes to continue its work on the same high level in cooperation with all stakeholders.

Figure 12. Responses to the question "Do you believe that AIKA operates in accordance with ESG?".
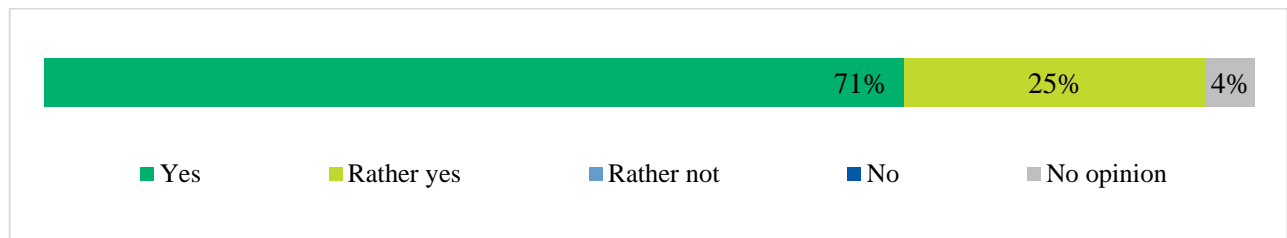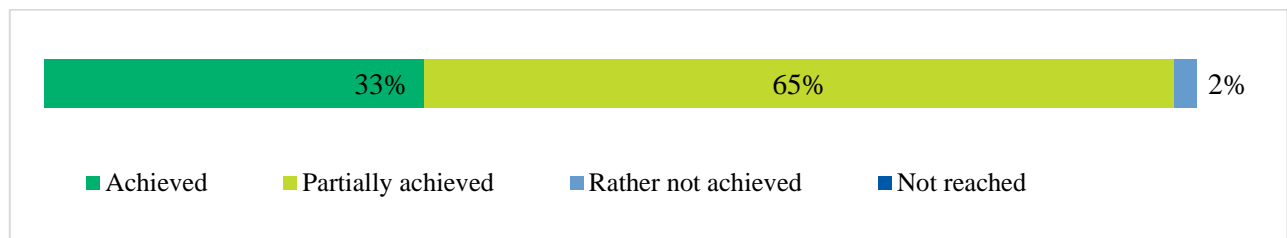

Figure 13. Responses to the question " Has the goal "To be a centre of competence for quality assurance of higher education in Latvia and to promote the international visibility and recognition of Latvian higher education" been achieved?".

8. RECOMMENDATIOS AND MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE PREVIOUS REVIEW AND THE AGENCY`S RESULTING FOLLOW-UP

The previous review of the Agency carried out in 2018, after that the progress visit (remotely) was organised and follow-up report was submitted. The Agency would like to note that all recommendations and suggestions were carefully reviewed and appropriate actions were taken. Indeed, some were initiated already at the time of the ENQA review, some were finalised soon after the review took place and some developments were the direct impact of recommendations of the ENQA review panel.

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

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

Actions taken:

In line with amendments to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education on December 11, 2018, new Cabinet regulations were approved. New regulations are less prescriptive and allow to the Agency to develop methodologies and guidelines more independently in order to ensure better compliance with ESG. Cabinet regulations states that the Agency develops assessment methodology and assessment criteria, has rights to select and approve assessment experts, diversify the number of experts and approve price-list for the assessments. Therefore, the Agency elaborated and approved methodologies, criteria and guidelines for all assessment procedures with respect to ESG.

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

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

Actions taken:

As it is mentioned in this SAR, the Agency has taken several steps for moving forward the concept of institutional review under the remit of the Agency.

- Several discussions, seminars and workshops (2019-2021) with all stakeholders were hold in order to discuss and agree on the new concept.
- The Agency was involved as a partner in the project "Road Map for Implementation of Institutional Assessment" within the ERASMUS+ programme which was coordinated by the MoES. As a result, the Agency has developed the concept for transition to the institutional accreditation, which will be further submitted by the MoES to the Cabinet for approval.
- Amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions are approved by authorising the Agency to conduct institutional review and SQC will be decision-making body, therefore institutional review is fully under the remit of the Agency.

As it was already noted above, the Agency currently has full autonomy in designing its assessment methodologies.

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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

Actions taken:

The Agency has implemented its approach to thematic analysis and is explained in the section 5.4 of this self-assessment report. Thematic analysis includes analyses of the process and results of external assessments, annual reports summarising all activities of the Agency and results of assessment procedures, as well as more comprehensive analysis of each study field based on the experts reports and SQC decisions, which are published at website of the Agency.

Thematic analysis on each study field is a novelty which was not implemented before and they are conducted in line with schedule of study fields assessment and accreditation. In addition to the thematic analyses, the Agency also conducts analysis on different topical issues.

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

The panel recommends that AIKA implements the new guidelines for self-evaluation reports and joint expert reports and in doing so are mindful of the need to ensure that:

- the standard for (ESG) 1.7 – information management extends to all three assessment procedures and to ensure they cover the rationale behind the ESG standard;

- the standard for public information ESG 1.8 and the clarity and objectivity of information about learning outcomes, admission criteria etc. is included for the QA procedure of licensing the study programme.

Actions taken:

According to the legislative amendments the Agency has got more autonomy in drafting methodologies, guidelines and assessment criteria. Therefore, the Agency has revised all the guidelines considering the recommendation provided, paying special attention to the inclusion of ESG 1.7 and ESG 1.8 in the guidelines (SAR section 6.1)

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

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

Actions taken:

The external quality assurance system in Latvia has been designed in a way that all quality assurance procedures together would form a cycle for continuous improvement that is applicable to every study programme.

During the reporting period there were several changes in the external assessment procedures, introducing new procedure as a short-term solution for certain cases and splitting assessment and accreditation of study fields in order to ensure that HEIs of Latvia have rights to choose any EQAR agency for assessment part, however, the decision on accreditation of study field is always made by the SQC. The purpose of each assessment and relations between are explained in the SAR section 6.2.

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

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

Actions taken:

According to the legislative amendments the methodologies and guidelines for each assessment have been revised, considering also recommendation provided. For example, for study field assessment and accreditation, assessment experts are not required to indicate the term of accreditation as it was before, it is only under the responsibility of the SQC. Therefore, there are no possibilities of discrepancies on this aspect. In addition, it is stated that in cases where additional information is needed, the SQC could request additional information to the experts and invite them to the meeting.

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

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

Actions taken:

According to the new methodologies and guidelines for study field assessment and accreditation, assessment experts are not required to indicate the term of accreditation as it was before, it is only under the responsibility of SQC. Therefore, there are no possibilities of discrepancies on this aspect. Furthermore, experts` joint reports include both aspects: quality assessment and assessment of compliance with regulatory enactments.

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

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

Actions taken:

On 21 June 2018 the amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions were approved by the Parliament and are in force from 1st January 2019. These amendments include the establishment of independent decision-making body Appeals Commission. The amendments state that a decision may be disputed in the Appeals Commission, and the decision by the Appeals Commission may be appealed to a court according to the procedures specified in the Administrative Procedure Law.

The amendments also state that the Appeals Commission shall consist of four experts, two of which shall be experts in higher education, and two shall be experts with obtained higher education in law science and professional experience in administrative procedure. Higher Education Quality Assurance Council shall approve the composition, chairperson, and deputy of the Appeals Commission. Composition of Appeals Commission is available at the website of the Agency.

The approved amendments ensure full independence of the Appeals Commission and exclude the situations of conflict of interest.

9. SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE AGENCY

S

Strengths

– Transparency of work of the Agency that ensures trust and respect of HEIs, assessment experts and other stakeholders.

– The manuals are developed in order to help new staff to be integrated into the processes more efficiently. The basic processes are documented and various templates and examples of forms are available.

– Highly developed E-platform for conducting assessments, which is efficient way for communication and information exchange among HEI, assessment experts and the Agency.

– An extensive database of assessment experts.

– Seminars and trainings organised by the Agency are in high demand from HEIs and assessment experts, therefore the platform for exchange of opinion and experience is ensured.

– All assessment procedures are clearly defined, have methodologies and guidelines.

– Efficient and open cooperation with HEI's and other stakeholders on national and international level.

– Efficient communication and support provided by professional and competent staff.

– Flexibility and capability to adapt with changing environment.

– Active involvement in quality assurance activities at international level.

W

Weaknesses

– A large amount of assessment procedures, which may lead to staff overload or turnover.

– E-platform does not provide opportunity to conduct all types of assessments, which would optimise the processes.

– Not enough human resources to develop more active and even interactive communication with the society.

– Lack of internal management system (software).

O

Opportunities

– More intensive engagement in the improvement of legislative framework and development of institutional accreditation in Latvia.

– Exploring other perspectives for conducting assessments abroad.

– Participation in the international projects.

– The Agency is involved and actively participates in the international organisations that expands the possibilities to develop needed skills and improve the quality of the work.

– Good practices could be disseminated more among HEI and other stakeholders.

T

Threats

- National legislation has impact on the work of the Agency. Amendments to the regulatory acts are sometime contradictive in their practical implementation, which may negatively affect the entire assessment procedure.

- The expanding range of tasks are not always fully state-funded, therefore lack of resources for developmental activities.

- Not all involved stakeholders ensure the required information in a timely manner.

- Lack of competent assessment experts in certain areas.

- Unpredicted obstacles and rapidly changing environment globally (e.g. pandemics).

10. CURRENT CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The role of the Agency has increasingly grown up in the higher education area, as it becomes core centre for quality assurance issues, which not only evaluates the quality, but also performs activities for continuous quality enhancement and quality culture development.

In addition, the Agency acts as a competent body for explaining different processes in higher education, clarifying regulatory requirements, providing advices and support for continuous improving of quality of higher education in Latvia.

Considering the current workload of the Agency and planned changes in the external quality assurance system, as well in the whole higher education system, there is a need for additional human resources, which corelates with additional funding.

It is evident that Covid-19 has left impact on the work of the Agency as well. During the pandemic the Agency staff switched to partially remote work, which is continuing to some extent, that means that new common practices and tools need to be created, including for the supervision and management.

Due to the national context the higher education system is quite restricted by the regulatory enactments, which has been changed in the last two years. As it is observed in some case the amendments are contradictive or not sufficiently clear, in some cases there is no transition period for introducing new amendments which causes uncertainty which legal requirements are in force in the decision-making process.

The Agency is investing a lot of work in 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.

The Agency works closely with all stakeholders and carefully analyses feedback provided, which ensures capability of the Agency to respond to increasing demands and react to changing obstacles. Based on the gained experience and support from stakeholders the Agency strongly believes that it is possible to overcome most of the threats mentioned and from the point where the Agency is now, take most out of the available opportunities.

Appendix 1: List of References

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To access the documents that are mentioned in the list of references please use the following links:

http://www.aika.lv/en/agency/legislation/

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