
ENQA AGENCY REVIEW: ACADEMIC INFORMATION CENTRE (AIC)

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21 JUNE 2018

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Latvian quality assurance agency Academic Information Centre (Akadēmiskās informācijas centrs), AIC, is an affiliate member of ENQA since 2015. It is not currently listed on the EQAR register. The quality assurance system in Latvia has undergone several systemic changes since the 1990s. These changes have eventually led to a more favourable national quality assurance system facilitating an opportunity for the national agency to be reviewed by ENQA in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015 edition.

This review is carried out to determine whether AIC is substantially compliant with the ESG and thus meets the criteria for full membership of ENQA, and the requirement for registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

AIC has several functions relating to European and national recognition and an information point for regulated professions. The quality assurance function was added to the existing AIC functions in 2015 and a separate *department* of AIC referred to as AIKA (Quality Agency for Higher Education - Augstākās izglītības kvalitātes aģentūra) was established. The review process involved a self-assessment carried out by AIKA. It also involved a two and a half-day site visit of the ENQA appointed panel in Riga, Latvia in February 2018. This report reflects only the quality assurance activities of AIC and AIKA as a quality assurance department within AIC and an agency for higher education - it refers almost exclusively to the work of that department, AIKA.

Since 2015 AIC aimed to improve the external quality assurance system for Latvian higher education through AIKA, which would operate in accordance with the ESG and promote the quality, visibility and international recognition of the Latvian higher education system. The quality assurance system in place covers all institutions in the Latvian higher education system: state institutions and private higher education institutions and the study programmes starting from short-cycle programmes to doctoral programmes.

AIC is funded from the state budget and AIKA has its own independent line in the budget. Complementary to that are fees received for institutions for the review procedures and funds from an ESF international development project, which has a focus to assist AIKA in its compliance with ESG across a number of initiatives.

In the light of the evidence provided by the documentation and the interviews at the site visit, the panel considers AIC/AIKA is a well-respected and well-established quality assurance institution and agency. Prior to the establishment of AIKA, AIC was already marking its reputation as a trusted and reliable agency which has been added to significantly since the establishment of the department AIKA (Quality Agency for Higher Education) and the implementation of its quality assurance function despite the very short amount of time. Both AIC and AIKA are recognised by all core stakeholders as making a difference to the system. Given the short history of AIKA to date and the fact that the predecessor agency (ies) were not viewed very positively by many stakeholders, it is recognised that the work of AIKA has high expectations, significant buy-in and support from the system and therefore has an important role to play in the improvement of higher education in Latvia. AIKA is seen as the connection between different levels of the government, universities, and employers and students who are all cooperating to support the work of the agency.

The panel found AIKA's performance against the ESG in accordance with the following:

- Fully compliant for the following ESGs: 3.2, 3.5,3.6, 3.7, 2.3, and 2.4
- Substantially compliant in the following ESGs: 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, and 2.6
- Partially compliant: 2.7 Appeals and Complaints

The panel hopes that its analyses and recommendations will support AIC/AIKA in its efforts to enhance the quality of the Latvian HE system and raise the impact of its quality assurance activities.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Academic Information Centre and its department AIKA (named Quality Agency for Higher Education - Augstākās izglītības kvalitātes aģentūra)], with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015*. It is based on an external review conducted between December and April 2017.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

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

As this is AIC/AIKA's first external review, the panel was expected to pay particular attention to the policies, procedures, and criteria in place, being aware that full evidence of concrete results in all areas may not be available at this stage and particularly as it was only established in 2015.

The agency is also applying to be registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2018 external review of AIC/AIKA was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the external review of AIC/AIKA was appointed by ENQA and is composed of the following members:

- Heli Mattisen, Chair, Director, Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) Estonia, Chair, quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee)
- Karena Maguire, Secretary, Head of Stakeholder Engagement, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Ireland, Secretary, quality assurance professional (ENQA nominee)
- Roger King, Visiting Professor, University of Bath, UK, Academic (EUA nominee)
- Blazhe Todorovski, Master of Law at University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje Macedonia, Student (ESU nominated Student member).

Ms Anaïs Gourdin, ENQA Review Coordinator managed the logistics and sequencing of the entire process. The panel would like to thank Ms Gourdin for her invaluable help and contribution to the efficiency of process, both in terms of logistics and clarification of ENQA guidelines and procedures and process.

The review process comprised: the nomination of the review panel members; production of the agency's self-assessment report (SAR); planning and pre-preparation meetings by the panel; requests for additional information by the panel; a site-visit by the panel to the agency; and the production of the external review report by the panel, which was sent to AIC/AIKA to comment on the factual accuracy of the report prior to consideration by the ENQA Board.

Finally, this external report is the result of the review process and was drafted by the review secretary in cooperation with the chair and panel members. It is submitted to the ENQA board for further consideration.

Self-assessment report

The panel received a 75 page SAR (excluding appendices) on 23rd December, 2017 approximately two months before the site-visit. The SAR referred to relevant operational, procedural, legal and other AIC/AIKA documentation, some of which the panel could retrieve from the internet and some which was requested by way of additional documentation from the agency after more detailed consideration by the panel. The panel would like to thank AIC/AIKA for how it responded to all of its requests in a professional and efficient manner both before and during the site visit.

AIKA indicated that the self-evaluation report was a collaborative work of the agency staff, an internal working group overseen by the Head of the agency Prof. Andrejs Rauhvargers and consultation with many external stakeholders. The agency held discussions with many stakeholders, including the Committee structures involved in the work of the agency (Committee for the Accreditation of Studies (CAS); Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes (CLSP) and the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (AIKA Council). External representatives consulted included institutional representatives on committees, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia (MoES), the Student Union of Latvia (LSA); experts from the accreditation processes and many more. AIKA also carried out some additional preparation on the process and self-evaluation with another sister QA agency, the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education SKVC (Lithuania). The development of the SAR was divided between staff members in accordance with responsible duties and weekly progress meetings were held to progress the report. The agency also considered other reports produced by ENQA review participant agencies. The final version of the report was approved by the chairperson of the AIC board, Baiba Ramaņa.

The panel found the SAR to be clear, open and honest in that it provided a factual and self-reflective attitude with a critical open self-evaluation process. The panel considered overall the staff found the process to be of genuine use and they used the opportunity of reflection to look at the operating environment and higher education system; and to analyse the agency's internal work. The strengths and weaknesses identified by the agency were frank, the staff were aware of weaknesses and in a position to consider areas for further improvement, even at this early stage of development of the agency.

The report was accessible as it followed the ENQA structure and guidelines. The panel found the references to the different agencies (AIC and AIKA as the department of the AIC to overlap and cause confusion as the precise relationship (governance, reporting and business) between AIC and AIKA was not clear to the panel at the early stage of the process. The panel requested the agency resource person to provide some brief clarifications on such matters prior to the site-visit. In addition, the description of the different accreditation processes and the follow-on connections between them and their proportional impact on the institutions (and quality assurance system) was also not clear to the panel from their descriptions in the SAR. This was compounded by the use of terminology which most members of the panel understood to represent a different process. These aspects are all referred to and explained later on in this report. Also confusing was the number of references to Councils (Council of Higher Education and the AIKA Council also referred to as the Council) all of which were subsequently clarified during the site visit process.

Site visit

The panel visited AIC/AIKA between 19th and 22nd of February 2018 in the agency's premises in Riga, Latvia. The panel met the following representatives of AIC/AIKA and external stakeholders:

- AIC Director who is also the Chairperson of the AIC Board and Deputy Chair of Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (AIKA Council)

- AIKA's Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes and Committee for the Accreditation of Studies (which are one and the same committee)
- the external 'Council' - Council of Higher Education
- AIKA External stakeholders and partner organisations (including the AIKA Council)
- Representatives of Student experts and Student Union of Latvia (LSA)
- AIC and AIKA leadership, Director, Head and Deputy Head
- AIKA staff - assessment coordinators and a range of specialist staff, ESF project coordinator
- AIKA's experts involved in evaluations both national and international
- Representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science and Ministries of Health, Defence and Agriculture.
- Representatives of the trade union of education and science employees and employer organisations
- Representative of all types of Higher education institutions both public and private

(Note: the full and final programme of the site visit is set out in annex 1)

Some members of the groups interviewed by the panel required translation from English to Latvian but mostly from Latvian to English. This was notified to the panel in advance. The translator was approved by ENQA in advance.

The panel also had an electronic Skype interview with a number of international expert panel members engaged by AIKA as part of the various accreditation processes. The panel was quite specific in its requests to AIKA regarding the external stakeholders it expected to see. It requested representatives that reflected not only engagement in each of the AIKA accreditation processes but also the different outcomes of the processes (both successful, and unsuccessful) including the only appeals case (chair of the AIKA appeal process was also interviewed) and institutional representatives that failed in this one appeals case to date.

AIKA's staff and external stakeholders, committee and council members and officials which were met by the panel provided an excellent representation of AIKA's activities, including both past and future directions. The AIKA executive had no shortage of willing stakeholders making themselves available to provide testament to the panel, and they did so with enthusiastic support for the agency. It was a testament to the work of the new agency and its positive impact on the HE system. The panel is confident that it has managed to verify and clarify the information that it considered prior to and during the site visit in a process of triangulation. The panel is sincerely grateful for the time taken by all the stakeholders for the interviews and for the staff of AIKA in providing such a cross representation of activities, even for those stakeholders that were not always satisfied with the outcome of their accreditation activities.

The panel greatly appreciates AIKA's support prior to and throughout the site-visit. The premises and the logistical arrangements were excellent. The information and documents requested before and during the site visit were provided quickly and many translations into English were required and provided, some at a short notice. Much of the documentation was provided in English by AIKA and the agency also provided a list of all relevant documentation which identified any documents that were only available in Latvian. This provided the panel with an early opportunity to request translations of important documents or parts thereof. The staff were available for clarification sessions whenever these were requested onsite by the panel and the professionalism of the agency staff demonstrated throughout the process was greatly appreciated by the panel.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN LATVIA

SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATVIA

The Latvian higher education system is closely aligned to the European Higher Education Area. There is a Qualifications Framework in place (LQF Diagram is provided in the SAR page 76) and qualifications are aligned with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). While Latvia uses its own national credit point system it has also been aligned with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and 1 Latvian credit is generally equivalent to 1.5 ECTS credits.

The higher education system is described as a binary system as the *Education Law* differentiates between academic and professional higher education, but provision is not strictly institutionalised. Higher education in Latvia is offered by private and public (state) higher education institutions (HEIs). There are two types of HEIs, **Colleges** (koledža) and **Institutions of higher education** comprising **Universities of applied sciences** (augstskolas); **Academies** (akadēmijas) and **Universities** (universitātes).

Colleges can only offer first level professional higher education programmes (corresponding to the EQF level 5). These are the newest type of professional education institutions in Latvia developed as independent education institutions or as structural units (or just as a group of first level study programmes) within higher education institutions. Regardless of the different names of education institutions, the legal status of college education is the same as other HEIs. HEIs can offer higher education on any level – the first level professional higher education, bachelor's (level 6), master's (level 7), and doctoral (level 8) degree programmes, where at least 65% of the elected staff hold a PhD degree. The different types of institutions have different requirements for their academic personnel in order to reach their named status.

All higher education institutions can provide tertiary level education and all expect colleges can run both academic and professional programmes.

Academic higher education study programmes are intended to prepare graduates for independent research, as well as to provide theoretical background for professional activities. Academic study programmes are implemented in accordance with the national standard of academic education. They usually comprise a thesis at the end of each stage and lead to a Bachelor's degree or Master's degree.

The **academic bachelor study programme** is 180-240 ECTS credits. The academic **master study programme** is 60-120 ECTS credits. The **professional master study programme** is at least 60 ECTS credits.

Professional higher education study programmes are tended to provide in-depth knowledge in a particular field, preparing graduates for design or improvement of systems, products and technologies, as well as to prepare them for creative, research and teaching activities in this field. The **first level professional higher education (college) study programme** is 120-180 ECTS credits. The professional **bachelor study programme** is at least 240 ECTS credits.

There are several **regulated professions**, where the content of the study programme is regulated more strictly. This is an important fact as AIKA have integrated the consideration of the existing regulated professions in the Latvian higher education as part of the agency accreditation process.

Institutions

There are two different types of higher education institutions in Latvia, colleges (both private and state) and institutions of higher education (*augstskola*) (both private and state). The total number of higher education institutions is 52. This is in addition to 2 branches of foreign higher education institutions. The number of institutions is high, considering the population is only 1.93 million.

A College (*koledža*) is an educational institution that provides programmes of the first level of professional higher education (level 5). According to the SAR there are 17 state and 9 private colleges in Latvia.

A higher education institution (*augstskola*) is an institution of tertiary level education that provides second level professional higher education programmes and academic higher education programmes, where scientific, research and creative activity takes place. Higher education institutions are divided into university and non-university higher education institutions. At higher education institutions with the term “*augstskola*” in their name at least 40% of academic staff in elected positions must hold a PhD degree and institutions with the term “*akadēmija*” in their name must fill 50% of academic positions with PhD holders, unless otherwise determined by the Cabinet of Ministers, based on the specific sphere of activity pertaining to the education establishment (e.g. art, architecture, theology, security, maritime affairs or national defence). There are 10 state and 11 private institutions of higher education in Latvia. There are 6 universities in Latvia.

University type higher education institutions providing bachelor’s (level 6), master’s (level 7), and doctoral (level 8) degree programmes, where at least 65% of the elected staff hold a PhD degree, which publish scientific periodicals covering areas of teaching and research implemented by the institution and have divisions or research institutes performing scientific research.

Study programmes (Academic and Professional)

Two groups of programmes can be distinguished: **academic programmes and professional programmes.**

Academic higher education programmes are based upon fundamental and/or applied science; they usually comprise a thesis at the end of each stage and lead to a bachelor’s degree (*bakalaura*) or master’s degree (*maģistrs*). Academic degrees are awarded in a certain area of science (there are 8 different thematic groups – education sciences; humanities and arts; social sciences, business and law; natural sciences, mathematics and information technologies; engineering sciences, manufacturing and construction; agriculture; health care and social welfare; services). The duration of bachelor’s programmes may be 3 to 4 years at different institutions. The 3-4-year bachelor’s degree programme is considered a complete academic qualification. A master’s degree is awarded after the second stage of higher education and requires at least 5 years total of higher education studies.

Study Directions

In Latvia the study programmes are grouped into study directions – these refer to **thematic groups of study programmes within each HEI**. The reference to study direction is also the unit that is assessed during the quality assurance procedures for AIKA. In total there are 29 study directions, defined by the Cabinet regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions (see page 78 of the SAR for details)

The Legislation and Regulatory Environment

As is the case in other European countries it is important to understand the legal framework in Latvia as it impacts on the operation of quality assurance in general. Some of the legislation in place acts like high level policy prescribing types of programmes, for example, the *Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Law on Vocational Education and Training* stipulate two cycles of professional higher education – first cycle professional higher education also known as college education (2-3 years) leading to the professional qualification Level 4 (*diploms par pirmā līmeņa profesionālo augstāko izglītību*), and second cycle professional higher education leading to the qualification level 5 (2-3 years following a first cycle programme, or not less than 4 years following upper secondary education).

In addition to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education a number of Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers are core to understanding the HE system and how the external QA system interacts:

- 14 July 2015 No. 407 “Regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions”;
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 25 July 2017 No. 429 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 407 of 14 July 2015 Regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions"
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 408 “Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes”
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 25 July 2017 No. 428 "Amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 408 of 14 July 2015 “Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes”"
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 409 “Price-list of the foundation “Academic Information Centre”.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Latvia has a history with quality assurance which goes back to the 1990s. The SAR states that Latvia was one of the first European countries to establish a Higher Education Area (EHEA) that introduced a quality assurance system and established a quality assurance agency. The first Latvian quality assurance agency was the Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (HEQEC). This was established in 1994 in cooperation by the Ministry of Education and Science, the Rectors’ Council and four Latvian universities. HEQEC performed accreditation of study programmes and higher education institutions (HEIs) between 1996 and 2012. It carried out two complete evaluation cycles of study programmes with each cycle covering a period of 6 years.

When HEQEC failed to secure compliance with the ESG in 2010 (ENQA membership), the Ministry for Education and Science undertook to consider alternative arrangements for quality assurance in Latvia in 2011. During the intervening period of transition from changing the quality assurance remit and approach from the old agency, HEQEC, to establishing the new agency, AIKA, the Ministry for Education and Science itself took over the function of carrying out quality assessments of higher education in Latvia until July 2015.

At that time AIC was well established as an independent organisation, trusted by the Ministry and stakeholders in the higher education system, and had considerable track record and experience with one of its main functions - the recognition of qualifications. The Ministry for Education and Science concluded that the establishment of an additional agency was neither feasible nor desirable in a political context and opted instead to extend the functions of AIC (the recognitions qualifications organisation) to embrace national quality assurance for higher education. The detailed structures for the new arrangements are explained in more detail later.

AIKA was established as a department of AIC with the status of an individual agency in order to provide optimum individual branding and independence for the new quality assurance model. AIC/AIKA together have a broad reach over higher education in Latvia in terms of the totality of functions. The officials in Latvia recognise that the role of qualifications recognition and quality assurance when working closely together as a complimentary system, provide many synergies for a national system of education.

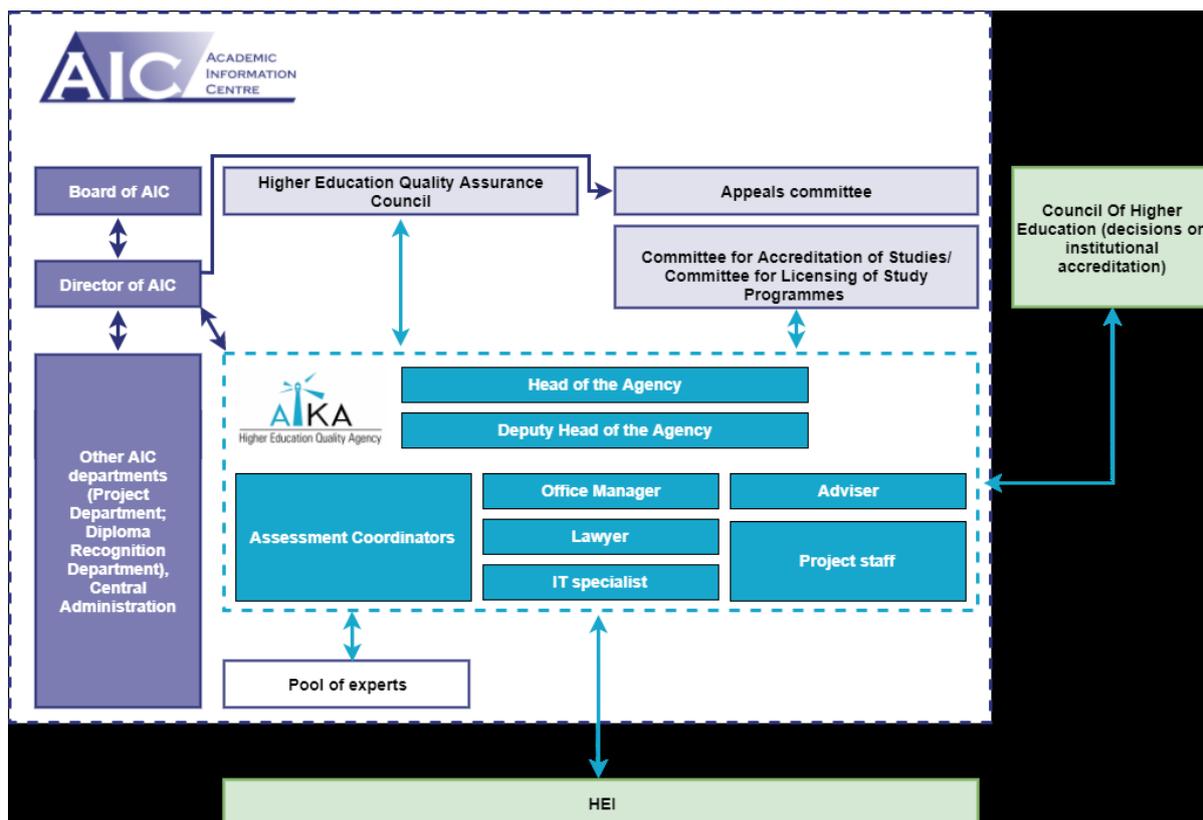
The legacy agency, HEQEC, was referenced frequently during the panel interviews by a range of stakeholders that had previous experience of this agency and with more recent experience of the new agency, AIKA. While HEQEC provided a well-established background and history of programme and institutional accreditation for Latvia, and the nature of all the legacy relationships was not the main focus of the work of this review. The panel understood from discussions with all stakeholders that this legacy model and approach of accreditation was in need of change.

THE AGENCY

ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE OF THE AGENCY

In order to describe the establishment of AIKA it is first necessary to look at the structures and work of the - AIC within which AIKA was established in 2015.

The Academic Information Centre (AIC) was established in 1994 - initially as a non-profit limited organisation. Today it is an independent 'foundation' and the reference to its original founders has been removed from its original statutes. In 2015, the Ministry sought to amend the *Law on Institutions of Higher Education (Latvijas Vestnesis 257 (5317))*, authorising the AIC to take on responsibility for quality assurance in higher education in Latvia. As mentioned previously, AIC established this new function as an accreditation department and called it 'AIKA' which in English translates to the "**Quality Agency for Higher Education**". AIC considered it important to distinguish the AIKA role through branding as the quality assurance role within a broader organisation, hence the title *quality agency for higher education*.



(ref Diagram : Page 12 of the SAR)

The Director of AIC (who is also the chairperson of AIC Board) is responsible for running the quality assurance as an independent function of AIC as set out in the diagram above. AIKA operates in the area of quality assurance of higher education independently as a department inside the larger organisation- AIC. The responsibility for running the quality assurance activities are delegated to the Head and Deputy Head of AIKA. It is important to note that the relationship between AIC and AIKA is limited enough in terms of operational autonomy, engagements and official dealings and negotiations with the Ministry for Education and Science and other state level authorities. Although AIKA avails of the organisation or AICs service staff, the main connection between AIC and AIKA (and support function provided to AIKA by AIC) is the accounting administration function and the organisation of tenders. The AIC Director is also responsible for the appointment of the appeals panel in the event that a HEI appeals the decision of one of the AIKA accreditation processes. Again, this responsibility appears to be a corporate level responsibility seeking optimum independence from AIKA for the process of appeals.

The AIC Director is responsible for the overall budget accountability for AIC which includes AIKA. AIKA determines its own budget (with predefined categories such as state financing, evaluation fees and other income from projects) which is signed off by the AIC Director. AIKA has its own independent line in the AIC budget for expenditure which is determined by the Director of AIKA and agreed by the Director of AIC – this latter connection provides the AIC Board with any information and updates.

AIC is organised with three departments in total (1) the accreditation department “Quality Agency for Higher Education” AIKA; (2) the Recognition Department and (3) the Projects Department and a central administration unit for accounting. According to the law the AIC Director is equally responsible for the QA Agency function. However, the main body of work for the AIC Director relates to the two other original departments of AIC and the administration unit. This work is quite distinct from that of

AIKA and involves the national representative in European recognition/information networks: ENIC/NARIC (added in 1995); the information centre for regulated professions implementing (added in 2003); National contact point Cedefop (added in 2004); National Europass Centre (since 2005); National Coordination Point for referencing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (added in 2008). The job description for the Head of AIKA provides significant delegated responsibility.

AIC has a governance structure with a small **board**, one of which is the Director of AIC (who is also the chair of that board) and two other non-executive members. The board was established in 2009 and is mainly concerned with financial accountability, auditing, state revenues and annual returns to the Ministry 4 times a year. This board does not consider AIC or AIKA core business nor does it make any such decisions other than financial oversight. The chairperson of the Board of AIC (Director of AIC) is responsible for the overall management of AIC whereas the heads/deputy heads of departments are responsible for the management of their departments.

AIKA governance is somewhat separate. AIKA has its own representative Council referred to as the '**Higher Education Quality Assurance Council** (AIKA Council)'. AIKA Council is a board of 15 representative members (see page 11 of the SAR). This Council which deals exclusively with AIKA work and does not have any connection to the work of AIC. The Council was established to '*perform strategic management of the agency (AIKA) and for assuring the accreditation of HEIs, study directions and study programmes*'; to establish the election criteria, composition and procedures for the main committee(s) that AIKA refers the results of its accreditation processes to for decision (**committee for the Accreditation of studies** and the **Committee for the Licencing of Study Porgrammes** or (both the same committee) – with the exception of any reports on the Review of Higher Education Institutions. The Chair of the Council is the Director General of the Employers' Confederation of Latvia and **the Deputy Chair is also the Director of AIC**. These two positions are appointed by the members of HEQAC. In 2017 the HEQAC approved Strategic directions for 2017 - 2021 of the development of AIKA.

In the case of a review of a HEI carried out by AIKA, these reports go to an external body for decision by yet another Council named **Council of Higher Education** and 'Council' for short (the green box in the diagram above). This is another type of independent **institution** with a broad representation and a range of duties of its own related to the strategic development of higher education and HEIs and the formulation of long-term plans and proposals for the development of education and science in the system of higher education and others. The composition of the Council is approved by Saeima (Latvian Parliament).

One other factor in the agency oversight is the legislation and Laws relating to Higher Education and the various **Cabinet Regulations within them**. These regulations set the operating context and general framework for many of the structures associated with accreditation such as the composition of councils, committees or criteria for the experience required of members. They also set the high-level criteria for the accreditation framework, including the number and type of experts, the fees for accreditation, the procedures for including representative members and observers and a range of other factors that will be looked at in detail under the section on compliance with ESG standards. Examples of the cabinet regulations that were commenced once AIKA was established when the Law on HEIs came into force, the corresponding regulations of Cabinet of Ministers were elaborated and introduced:

- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 407 "Regulations on Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions";

- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 408 “Regulations regarding Licensing of Study Programmes”
- Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 July 2015 No. 409 “Price-list of the foundation “Academic Information Centre””.

In 2017 AIKA was successful in the negotiation of amendments to a number of cabinet regulations which have provided the executive with considerable more flexibility in the development of guidelines for QA activities.

Staffing of AIKA

In addition to the Head and Deputy Head positions, AIKA has 6 assessment coordinators also referred to as experts who manage a range of functions and also coordinate the accreditation processes, establish, train and maintain the pool of experts, act as adviser to the expert panel and clarify and communicate with the HEIs. In addition, specialist staff include an office manager, lawyer, Information Technology specialist. The agency had the benefit of an interim adviser for a while when establishing itself in 2015 to assist in taking on some of the content from the legacy agency – the pool of expert’s database and the database of assessments. In addition other staff members include three project employees to assist with the ESF funded Project “The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR agency” to achieve EQAR register membership. This includes a Project Manager who has considerable project experience.

AIKA’S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

The overall aim stated by AIC statutes (amendments to the AIC statutes 2015) for its quality department AIKA is “providing support for quality assurance in higher education by organising accreditation of higher education institutions, colleges and study direction, and licensing of study programmes”.

According to the law on Higher Education there are three main quality assurance processes performed in Latvia - accreditation of a higher education institution (HEI), accreditation of study direction and licensing of study programme. There is a sequence to state recognition which is linked to the entitlement of HEIs to issue state Diplomas (qualifications). “... 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 Saeima or accordingly by the Cabinet.”(SAR page 8)*

Accreditation of higher education institutions

This process is described as an assessment of “the work organisation and quality of resources of a HEI as a result of which the HEI is recognised by the state and can issue state recognised diplomas”. The HEIs are accredited under this process for an indefinite term and the extraordinary or exceptional accreditation of a HEI can also be initiated in cases where there is a violation of law/regulatory acts. One such case occurred under AIKA. The decision on the accreditation of a HEI is taken by the *Council for Higher Education*. However, this HEI accreditation process is operated in a similar way to an initial licencing. All HEIs that were transferred over to AIKA from the legacy agency were deemed to have complied with institutional accreditation. The process is at present only live for those HEIs that have committed violations and are referred by the Minister for Education and Science for an exceptional review or those HEIs that are new to the Latvian higher education system. Despite the title of this

process 'institutional' the accreditation of study programme directions appears to be a more comprehensive and core accreditation process.

Accreditation of study direction (groups of study programmes in a field or discipline)

This is a core accreditation process for AIC/AIKA involving comprehensive institutional criteria and internal QA with other resources and a focus on the programme criteria. The improvement of the culture of quality is also a main objective of this process. The Accreditation of study direction refers to a group assessment for a number of programmes in a 'field' or 'discipline' with the purpose of determining the quality of the resources of a higher education institution or college and the ability to implement a study programme corresponding to a specific study direction in accordance with the regulations specified. Completion of this process gives the higher education institution or college the right to issue a higher education State-recognised diploma for successful acquisition of a study programme corresponding to the relevant study direction. The process is managed and facilitated by AIKA staff and the final accreditation decision is taken by the CAS facilitated by AIKA. Study directions can be accredited for different terms 6 years, 2 years or 0 years with different conditions attached. To date, 24 out of 200 accreditations have been carried out by AIKA. The expiry date for all outstanding accreditations is 2019. AIKA has accredited all the study directions where the accreditation term was expiring in 2015 - 2017.

Licensing of study programme

This refers to an assessment process for granting rights to a higher education institution or its branches to implement a new study programme. Each new study programme has to be licensed and only after that has taken place can students be enrolled on the programme. The process is managed and facilitated by AIKA staff and the final decisions on the licensing of study programmes is taken by the CLSP, also facilitated by AIKA. There are links between the accreditation of a study direction and licencing of a programme for example - in terms of follow up and length of recognition, so if a study programme is licensed and it corresponds to an accredited study direction in the respective HEI, the study programme is accredited until the end of the accreditation term of the study direction.

Assessment of Changes in Study direction

This process is very much a technical process designed to provide an opportunity for institutions to change a range of technical aspects relating to the content and organisation of study programmes, post accreditation. The process is not compulsory or planned as it is initiated whenever required and requested by the institution. It may occur at any time, so it is not a typical periodic accreditation process, although it is designed to ensure the changes requested are feasible and in keeping with the initial accreditation of licencing outcome. In most cases, the changes may be made by the HEI without reference to experts. Cabinet regulations specify the cases where experts need to be involved in such assessments. Examples of changes considered as part of the process include changes to the name of the study programme or professional qualification; entry/admission requirements; changes to the academic staff. **As this is not a typical accreditation process and more of a 'follow up consequence' of other accreditation processes, is it not considered by the panel to require reference under findings on ESG compliance in this report.**

Development of Methodologies and Guidelines by the Agency

Guidelines developed by the Agency	language
The guidelines for the preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Study Directions	LV, ENG
The guidelines for the preparation of the Joint report of the group of experts for study directions	LV, ENG

The guidelines for the preparation of an application for study programme licensing and description of study programme	LV, ENG
The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the experts for study programme licensing	LV, ENG
The guidelines for the preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges	LV, ENG
The guidelines for the preparation of the Joint report of the group of experts for Institutions of Higher Education/Colleges	LV, ENG
Assessment methodologies developed by the Agency	
The Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes (was in force until 20/12/2017)	LV
The Methodology for Organising Licensing of Study Programmes (in force from 20/12/2017)	LV
The Methodology for Assessing Institutions of Higher Education/Colleges	LV, ENG
The Methodology for Assessing Study Directions (was in force until 20/12/2017)	LV, ENG
The Methodology for Assessing Study Directions (in force from 20/12/2017) The Methodology for Organising Assessment of Changes in Accredited Study Directions	LV

(SAR page 85 (extract from original table) - Since the publication of the AIKA SAR the assessment methodologies are now in English as well as Latvian.)

Registers and Databases

AIKA has a central database for storing the details of all experts used for evaluation processes. This is the main source used by AIKA for selecting experts it is an internal electronic platform which has been updated recently with information on the experts, in accordance with certain criteria. AIKA inherited the database in 2015, when the AIC took over the quality assurance agency function from the Ministry in 2015 and proceeded to verify all the data on existing experts and add new experts to the platform. It includes a wide range of experts, those who have participated in the assessment procedures in the previous systems and also new experts identified by AIKA, who have been accepted recently but not yet participated in any evaluation procedures.

AIKA also has a 'Study Direction Register'. This is a database with information about all study programmes which are licensed and information on accredited study directions. The data base is updated on a regular basis. There is also information available on the various higher education institutions in Latvia.

Observers

The AIKA evaluation procedures provide an opportunity for specified third parties to participate in procedures for the accreditation of study directions as observers. According to the cabinet regulation 407 -"observers delegated by the Student Union of Latvia and the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees, may participate in the work of the committee for the assessment of a study direction. Inputs from certification institutions that perform the certification of specialists in the area of a certain regulated professions are requested. Representatives of those ministries that are responsible for certain thematic areas are invited to attend meetings of the accreditation committee providing information on professional regulatory requirements. AIKA approves the observers and

experts groups, along with the approval of the composition of the assessment committee. The Committee for the Assessment of Study Directions shall take into account (among other information sources) the information provided by Observers on the *implementation* of the study direction without the right to vote, if such information has been provided (54.5). The implementation of the observer status by AIKA is assisted with a set of guidelines and it is largely perceived as an opportunity for potential experts to become acquainted with the evaluation process. For example, the Student Union of Latvia often uses this opportunity to nominate a student observer to train as a future student expert. The Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees usually nominate staff members (experts in the higher education sector) as it is possible for them to become acquainted with the current issues of education and science employees in higher education.

ESF Funded Project

AIKA is currently benefitting from a European Social Fund project with a planning period of 2014-2020 on "*The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR agency*". A project team of three employees has been set up in the agency. The project funding also supports a percentage of some of the salary for three of the senior AIKA executives. The project team is responsible for administrating the project and coordinating the project activities in cooperation with all agency staff. The programme of activities related to the project was considered by the expert panel. The agency was also provided with additional funding under this project to support the quality assurance activities of the agency and for strengthening its capacity with the aim to meet all requirements for being registered in EQAR.

International and Regional Activities

AIKA is involved and actively participates in many international activities through its membership of European and international networks, including the regional network for Baltic states; and as a partner organisation for a number of international projects; Individual staff also engaging in accreditation and assessment projects; by establishing cooperation and bilateral agreements with other European agencies and creating opportunities for staff to visit agencies to observe on evaluation processes and consult with other agencies on enhancing the efficiency of AIKA.

As a sister department within the AIC/AIKA also has an opportunity to assist the qualifications recognition department in international projects for example linking Qualifications Recognition to Quality Assurance. The agency staff are keen to find solution for a more efficient electronic engagement with stakeholders in its work on quality assurance.

Page 22 of the SAR refers to the many additional activities and projects that AIKA has been involved in as an outward facing agency.

AIKA'S FUNDING

AIKA's budget is partly state funded and partly from accreditation/licencing fees. HEIs are charged for external QA accreditation and licencing processes. The fees charged to the HEIs for the accreditation processes are set in the Cabinet Regulations No. 409. As the extent of this funding is not entirely predictable and does not cover all indirect costs, state funding is provided to cover the costs of the broader implementation of the functions of the agency in order to "*ensure sustainability and the independence of the activities of the agency*" (SAR page 23) . The allocation of the state budget is based on the Cabinet Order No. 640 "About the Concept "External Quality Assurance System Development of Latvian Higher Education".

Another source of funding is the ESF project which covers the costs of developing capacity in the quality assurance context (examples include, international experts participating on accreditation panels; the costs of 12 accreditations – the HEIs did not have to pay fees for accreditation conducted

in the framework of the project. The project also covers 30% of the cost of the three key executives of AIKA, the Director and Deputy Director and the Senior Expert. The figure below shows the level and proportion of funding for the agency in 2015-2017. In 2017 the state contribution was 36.4% and 22.6% represented the fees from HEIs for accreditation/licencing with the highest proportion of funding coming from the ESF project 41%.

Sources of Agency funding 2015-2017

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

(Figure1, Sources of Agency Funding – SAR page 24)

The Head of AIKA prepares a financial budget which includes spending priorities for a specified period. This budget is agreed with the Director of AIC before a submission is made to the Ministry for Education and Science.

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

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

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

Evidence

This is the first full review of AIKA for the purpose of ENQA membership. The panel had no previous review to refer to for follow up.

Since its establishment in 2015, AIKA has achieved a significant amount of progress in ensuring that the Latvian higher education system is progressing, achieving a trustworthy relationship with the higher education institutions. The agency was established at the same time as the new ESG standards were adopted in 2015. This was an advantage in timing and helped to commence the alignment of policies and criteria, guidelines and methodologies and templates of the evaluation processes. AIKA has carried out a number of evaluation processes and one appeal since its establishment (39 licencing of programmes and 1 institutional review, 49 assessments of changes in study directions and 24 accreditation procedures of study directions according to SAR table on page 24 which refers to the number of assessment procedures for 2015-2017).

The mission and vision of AIKA are part of the strategy approved by the AIKA Council (SAR page 62). The agency was set up to improve the external quality assurance system for Latvian Higher Education in accordance with the implementation of the ESG and promote the quality and international recognition of Latvian HE. This understanding was reiterated by the Committees making decisions on accreditation, the (AIKA) Higher Education Quality Assurance Council and the external Council of Higher Education. The composition of these governance structures is orientated towards stakeholders. The mission and vision is published on the website and it is also fully understood and actively supported by the many groups of stakeholders met by the review panel during the site visit. The level of respect and trust shown to the agency after such a short time of existence is significant.

“Vision:

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

Mission:

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

(SAR page 14)

The role of AIC is embedded in the mission, the goals and objectives of each of the quality assurance activities (accreditation and licensing). They are clearly described in the legal framework and by AIKA and published along with a description of the methodologies that specify the nature of the interaction between the AIKA and AIC and relevant stakeholders with templates and guidelines to guide all parties involved in the evaluation of the process. HEIs are particularly grateful for such clarity, transparency and guidance.

Accreditation of Study Direction

According to the Law on Higher Education (Section 1, Clause 16): ***accreditation of the study direction is an inspection with the purpose of determining the quality of the resources of an institution of higher education or college and the ability to implement a study programme corresponding to a specific study direction in accordance with regulatory enactments. The accreditation of the study direction of an institution of higher education or college gives the institution of higher education or college the right to issue a State-recognised diploma of higher education for successful acquisition of a study programme corresponding to the relevant study direction.***

Therefore the purpose of the accreditation of study direction set by the legal framework is not entirely supportive of the development of a quality culture. However, the agency has managed to add an improvement led approach and dimension to this evaluation procedure in the way in which the newly developed guidelines have been set.

As a result, the accreditation of study directions complies with all standards in part 2 ESG, even if there is a slight tension between the definition in the legislation and the improvement led character of AIKA's procedure.

Compliance with ESG part 2: This is the main AIKA accreditation process which addresses the internal quality assurance of the HEIs, particularly those in the context of the criteria for programme accreditation. The process and the associated aims, objectives and criteria are clearly defined and designed to effectively accredit study directions and associated QA resources. This is a periodic evaluation with a fixed evaluation timeline. The process is predefined, and 24 accreditations have been carried out by AIKA in a short period of time. The methodologies and structures outlined in ESG 2.3 apply to the accreditation process (self-assessment; external review with a group of independent external international and national experts, including students). A site visit is part of the process and reporting and follow up which is dependent upon the success of the process and its findings. Reports refer to evaluation of the criteria for the process and outcomes are made available to all involved in the process. The implication of decisions for a negative evaluation is significant for the institution and follow-up is part of the process with a specific timeline associated with accreditation. Accreditation of study direction is required to authorise the HEI to issue state-recognised diplomas (according to the law of HEIs accreditation of study programme is one of three conditions here). Full reports were published and accessible to all, together with the final decisions. Complaints and appeals processes are in place for this process.

Accreditation of an Institution of Higher Education or College

According to the Law on Higher Education (Section 1, Clause 3) this process is an *assessment of the work organisation and quality of resources of an institution of higher education or college as a result of which it is granted the status of a state-recognised institution of higher education or college*. As mentioned in the introductory part of the report, the HEIs are accredited under this process for an indefinite term and the extraordinary or exceptional accreditation of a HEI can also be initiated in cases where there is a violation of law or regulatory acts. The name of the procedure could be considered to be misleading in that it is not a regular periodic activity which is the more commonly understood model in Europe, however it is fit for the purpose of the assessment it is designed to achieve. This can be described as a type of once-off licencing of an institution with an additional purpose of resolving situations with an intervention where an institution has committed some violations. In this latter purpose there was one example of where a HEI committed a violation and the institutional accreditation process was initiated as the evaluation process. In this procedure, the final decision is made outside the agency, by the Council of Higher Education, which is an independent institution founded by the parliament. According to the Cabinet Regulation No 407 Clause 10. *The decision on accrediting the institution of higher education or the college shall be taken by the Council, if on the day, on which the decision is taken, at least half of the study directions, in which the institution of a higher education or the college implements their study programmes, has been accredited.*

The amendments to the Cabinet Regulation proposed by AIKA and approved by the Cabinet of Ministers 25 July 2017, gave AIKA far more flexibility in developing new detailed guidelines for self-evaluation of institutions, as well as for groups of experts in accordance with ESG.

Compliance with ESG part 2: the institutional accreditation process addresses the internal quality assurance of the HEIs. The process and the associated aims objectives and criteria are clearly defined and designed to effectively evaluate a new institution for accreditation purposes be it on a once-off basis and for any violations that may occur for institutions previously accredited – all fit for the current purpose declared. The process predefines and has been implemented recently with the structures outlined in ESG 2.3 (self-assessment; external review with a group of independent external experts, including students and including a site visit, reporting and follow up which is dependent upon the success of the process and its findings) – all demonstrated by reports that refer to criteria for outcomes made available to all involved in the process prior to evaluation. The implication of decisions for a negative evaluation is significant for the institution and in one example it was to discontinue accreditation due to violations which has a follow-on impact on the ability of the HEI to issue State-recognised diplomas (According to the law of HEIs Institutional accreditation is one of three conditions here). Full reports are published and accessible to all together with the final decisions. Complaints and appeals processes are in place for this process even though the final decision is taken by an external Council for Higher Education. AIKA and the Ministry are currently considering a new model with more regular periodic activity.

Licensing of a study programme

As described earlier, licencing is an evaluation/assessment process which grants rights to a higher education institution or its branches to implement a new study programme. Each new study programme has to be licensed and only after that has taken place can students be enrolled on the programme. The process has clear goals and criteria for assessment. The process is managed and facilitated by AIKA staff and the final decisions on the licensing of study programmes is taken by the CLSP also facilitated by AIKA. While the process of licencing of a study programme is a regular activity for the agency, there are also links between the accreditation of a study direction (groups of programmes) and licencing of a programme in terms of follow-up (any panel recommendations from licencing is followed up in the appropriate study direction accreditation) and the length of recognition is also fixed - if a study programme is licensed and it corresponds to an accredited study direction in

the respective HEI, the study programme is accredited until the end of the accreditation term of the study direction.

Compliance with ESG part 2: The process is more control/criteria focussed than quality enhancement focussed, and the criteria are programme orientated with appropriate internal QA. The self-evaluation requirements presented by the HEIs for licencing are significant in terms of the sheer volume of information submitted, the reports are more prescribed and compact. AIKA has made attempts to reduce the documentation submitted by HEIs to focus on the most meaningful documentation. Only Latvian national experts are used for licencing, but expert groups do include the full scope of stakeholder representatives – students and employers. A site visit is part of the process and reporting and follow up which is dependent upon the success of the process and its findings. Reports refer to evaluation of the criteria for the process and outcomes are made available to all involved in the process. The implication of decisions for a negative evaluation is significant for the institution and follow-up is part of the accreditation of study directions. Full reports are published and accessible to all, together with the final decisions. Complaints and appeals processes are in place for this process.

Assessment of Changes in Study direction

Described earlier as a technical or controlling process to limit amendments to programmes after they have been accredited. This process is clear in its goals and outcomes and it is designed only to provide an opportunity for institutions to change a range of technical aspects relating to the content and organisation of study programmes, post accreditation. The process is not designed to be regular, periodic or compulsory or planned as it is only initiated as required basis at the request of the institution. Therefore, the changes in study directions is not in accordance with ESG (1 expert, ESG part 1) nor does the review panel consider that it should be due to the aim of the process. (refer to page 16)

Parallel to undertaking the quality evaluation activities, AIKA has been active in supporting the implementation of ESG in HEIs by holding a series of seminars for the HEIs to clarify any new guidelines and report templates. Briefing was provided to HEI officers expected to prepare self-evaluation reports and for managing external evaluation. (SAR p 42 *From the moment when AIC took over the function of a quality assurance agency, the agency has provided consultations for HEI on preparation of the self-assessment reports. Moreover, now when the current guidelines are introduced, the consultations will be organised in a more structured way and on a regular basis*)

AIKA also consulted all stakeholders in the development of new guidelines and templates for review reports (Appendix 2 page 85 of the SER refers to the full list of documents developed by AIKA). The guidelines and methodologies and description of the evaluation processes provide a clear differentiation between internal and external quality assurance.

All stakeholders are involved in the work and activities of AIKA. Overall there is very close cooperation with the Student Union of Latvia of Latvia and the National Employers' Organisation – where both organisations are involved in nominating experts for the AIKA expert panels. The composition of the AIKA Council includes a wide range of representatives from the core stakeholder groups in addition to the committee making the final decisions.

Besides running accreditation procedures, AIKA has conducted a range of thematic analyses, some of which it has presented to the specific stakeholders in seminars and used to inform or update its own rules and procedures.

In addition, the inclusion of international experts in the work of the agency has significantly added to the expertise and advice available, as the panel found the international experts to provide a broad range of solid recommendations for the future improvements. The agency has also sought to benchmark itself with evaluation activities by involving itself in international projects and observing evaluation processes under the jurisdiction of other agencies that are compliant with ESG.

Analysis

AIKA carries out a variety of external quality assurance activities to achieve different objectives such as programme (study direction and licensing) evaluation, assessment and institutional , although not on a regular basis. The quality assurance activities are compliant with ESG part 2 with the exception of the process which facilitates (limited and legally prescribed) - changes to study direction. Also, although the agency has developed follow-up procedures for processes, in reality enough time has not elapsed to implement all these procedures, since the recommendations and decisions on accreditation were made. The evaluation processes support the strategic mission and role set out for the agency. The agency continues to look at the enhancement orientation meaningfulness of the evaluation processes (Institutional accreditation in particular). In an effort to keep the processes fit for purpose the agency has taken corrective action to limit burden on the HEIs and in particular the expert panels with regard to the volume of documentation submitted as part of the self-evaluation for the programme focussed evaluation processes.

The HE system has been well prepared by AIKA for the range of quality assurance activities the agency has implemented: consultations and briefings on guidelines and proposed changes, feedback sought briefings and explanation on criteria, training of experts and HEIs are invited to be present at the final deliberations. International experts are involved in the processes providing valuable feedback to the agency staff. Stakeholder engagement and involvement in the evaluation activities is a strong feature of the Latvian system and the panel considers a high level of trust on the part of stakeholders is evident. However, despite the clear and transparent approach there is also a clear understanding of the different roles and responsibilities by the HEIs and AIKA on external and internal quality assurance demonstrated by the open and transparent procedures, guidelines and cabinet regulations and the documentation developed to support the processes (report templates for input and output). This is also demonstrated by the implementation of the processes, objective independent decision making and the impact of the outcomes of the QA activities on the HEIs. This is all greatly helped by the fact that this suite of three main QA activities is the core focus of AIKA work and all those involved appear to be motivated to move more towards a system of quality enhancement.

The agency's mission refers to quality enhancement and improvement. The implementation of the high-level cabinet regulations stipulates high level criteria which are closer to a quality control environment rather than quality enhancement. However, AIKA has negotiated with the government for amendments to be made to these regulations. As a result, in the amendments the Ministry for Education and Science has delegated responsibility to AIKA to develop the next level of guidance for the implementation of the quality assurance processes (including guidelines and report templates). AIKA has used this opportunity to embed and support a greater alignment with ESG and to provide more guidance that is in keeping with the quality enhancement and improvement of the Latvian HE system with more work to be achieved here. This in turn helps to translate the mission, role and objectives of AIKA into its daily activities.

The involvement of employers, students, international experts and the institutions that are responsible for certification of specialists in the area of a certain regulated professions has provided the agency with an excellent start and enabled compliance with the ESG 2015.

Panel commendations

The panel commends the efforts of AIKA to date in negotiating the amendments to the Cabinet Regulations and the significant groundwork achieved since 2015 in striving towards ESG compliance, with the cooperation and trust of the higher education system.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends that AIKA continue to ensure that all quality evaluation processes (accreditation of study directions, licensing of study programmes 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.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel recommends that AIKA should further enhance the quality improvement agenda by providing some core definitions for the higher education system. The definition of ‘quality’ and “Quality Assurance” could be a useful place to commence this work by establishing a broader agency policy on quality assurance. This could also provide even further definition and explanation on the demarcation of responsibilities between internal and external quality assurance.

Panel conclusion: Substantially Compliant

ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

Standard:

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

Evidence

AIC has the legal status of an organisation charged with national quality assurance, following an amendment to the legislation in 2015 to extend its formal role and functions to include quality assurance. AIC was established in 1994 - initially as a non-profit Ltd organisation. In 2004 - the status of AIC was changed to the foundation in accordance with the new law “Associations and Foundations Law”. In 2009, AIC statutes and structure were changed to be compliant with the Associations and Foundations Law, and to remove the Ministry and Institute, from the AIC Statutes. The AIC Foundation operates in accordance with its Statutes. The 2015 amendment provided AIC an opportunity to establish a new department which was assigned to take over the responsibility for quality assurance activities in higher education.

As per previous references, the interviews with all stakeholders, providers, professional regulators, national and international students and experts reassured the panel that AIKA is formally recognised by all the different stakeholders, as the competent authority in charge of the external quality assurance evaluation processes formally and legally established under the remit of Academic Information Centre.

Analysis

AIKA is formally recognised by the higher education system as the responsible agency for higher education, carrying out the various quality assurance evaluations with full and absolute authority. The decision to avoid establishing a new separate agency was a political decision made by the government to avoid duplication of costs etc. However, in discussions with stakeholders, the name of AIC is frequently used to refer to or represent AIKA activities and stakeholders and staff alike reference the two names interchangeably. It was difficult for the panel to understand which agency was being referred to at any one time. Although the agency (AIC/AIKA) is fully compliant with this standard, there is some confusion regarding the reference to the name. In the SAR and in discussions with stakeholders, AIC is referred to more often than AIKA. When representing Latvia abroad, the panel were told the name used is AIC/AIKA

Panel suggestions for further improvement

If it is the intension to further establish the AIKA brand as a separate function or quasi agency (under AIC) more effort is required on branding activities. The branding of AIKA still lives in the shadow of AIC. The panel suggests that AIKA is branded with more visibility of the agency, supported by external communications; a plan or strategy with defined target groups both national and international.

At the very least, the panel would like to see more clarity over which agency is and should be referred to when representing Latvia abroad, communicating with international experts and general engagement. Although the local audience referred mostly to AIC, the SER referred to AIKA so it was more confusing to an outside international audience.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard:

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

Evidence

Operational independence for AIKA is clearly demonstrated by official documents: the legal framework referred to earlier is in place; the AIKA Council is composed of stakeholder representatives and the decision-making committee, CAS and CLSP committee members are elected by the Council.

Organisational independence which refers to procedures and overarching criteria, are set out in the Cabinet regulations. The agency has managed to make amendments to these regulations but quite a number of details remain in the state regulations as they refer to the number of experts, the different deadlines for processes, and detailed descriptions of the procedures. Since July 2017 expert panels are appointed/approved by AIKA, with the exception of the experts for assessing changes. Until July 2017 expert panels were approved by CAS/CLSP, but selected by AIKA (following nominations of student members and employers nominated by respective unions). AIKA facilitate stakeholder engagement, briefing and clarifying, training and establishing panels.

The independence of the formal outcomes remain the responsibility of AIKA. Expert reports are presented to the decision-making committees - CAS and CSLP without any undue influence from third parties. However, the formal outcomes for the Institutional Accreditation is a decision made by the

external Council of Higher Education. Although much detail remains in the Cabinet regulations, it is not enough to undermine independence in the context that is required for ESG compliance:

- The overarching Cabinet regulations remain but the panel understands that the responsibility for establishing guidelines in these regulations has moved to AIKA recently and will continue to evolve even further to AIKA control over time. Following discussions with Ministry representatives, this was also indicated by the AIKA executive.
- Since July 2017 AIKA has had more freedom to further define the assessment criteria set by the regulations through the new guidelines, this was not the case during the review period under consideration (even the templates were prescribed by the Cabinet regulations 407 and 408) but these regulations are now more in line with ESG.

Cabinet regulations specify the appointment of third parties from predefined specific organisations - the Employers' Confederation of Latvia (Employer experts) and Student Union of Latvia (nominates both student observers and student experts) and the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employee (nominates observers). However, in practice there are AIKA guidelines underpinning this process, the number of third parties is limited and the chair of the panel controls observer engagement with the panel/process. All stakeholders interviewed by the panel considered this practice to be very positive adding value for panels and providing a training experience for potential new expert panel members, students in particular. Observers were also said to provide invaluable additional input at times. The observers can take part in expert trainings and they sign the declaration of confidentiality and absence of the conflict of interest.

- The panel discovered through the procedures and documentation that the chairperson of CAS or CLSP may invite the representatives of ministries with competence and responsibility for a study direction or professional regulatory experts delegated by the ministries to the respective meeting of this committee. In practice, however, this was to ensure that Institutions that are responsible for certification of specialists in the area of a certain regulated professions or ministries funding certain study directions were available to the committee to provide additional expert opinion on the employment and other regulatory aspects - without having any influence or even knowledge of the final decision of the committee.
- HEI representatives under evaluation are invited to the meeting of the committee to hear the deliberations. Again, this is managed to ensure the independence of the decision-making was maintained and all stakeholders considered this practice to be extremely beneficial for those HEIs under evaluation. The panel understood that this practice also supported the practically non-existent complaints and appeals.

Analysis

While some aspects of the definition and prescription of some of the agency's procedures and methods are taken from high level Cabinet Regulations, the review panel looked closely at all aspects of the regulations, reports and other supporting documentation and interviewed representatives of committees and HEIs and the Ministry to conclude that the independence of the AIKA operations and governance is not undermined. AIKA has already managed some significant change with additional devolved responsibility to AIKA from the Ministry under existing Cabinet Regulations. The Ministry is very supportive of AIC/AIKA independence as is the HE system. There is one exception in this context which is the final decision on the institutional accreditation which is taken by the Council for Higher Education. However, this process is technically not designed to be regular or periodic at present and

it exists more as a legacy regulation process. In its current formulation the institutional accreditation is not configured as a core quality process despite its title. AIKA manages all aspects of the process but the final decision goes to the external committee.

There is evidence following dialogue with the panel, that both the Ministry for Education and Science and the AIKA executive are currently supporting the concept of a new institutional review model which would be more in keeping with international practice and additional compliance with ESG. This new model would support AIKA as the final decision making body, in contrast to the existing external decision making body for this process - *Council for Higher Education*. The final outcomes of the quality assurance processes of accreditation of study directions and licensing are the responsibility of AIKA facilitated external committees.

Panel commendations

The panel found the commitment of the Ministry staff to the independent agency to be extremely encouraging.

Panel recommendations

The panel recommends that 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.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Standard:

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

Evidence

AIKA has been very active in analyses despite the short time since its establishment in 2015 - 2018. The quality management manual for the agency refers to thematic analysis:

"The agency prepares thematic analysis, including the best practices and the recommendations of the assessment outcome in compliance with the appropriate plan (within a year), as well as ensures the publication of the analysis on the website of the agency".

This activity has been divided into three discrete categories to date:

- Thematic analysis based on the results of assessment procedures;
- Thematic analysis for the purpose of developing the external quality assurance system in Latvia
- Thematic analysis based on specific topics that are important for the higher education society in Latvia

Thematic analysis based on the results of assessment procedures

AIKA has carried out an analysis of assessment procedures for the past two academic years 2016/2017 based upon a survey of expert panel members and a separate survey of the institutions engaged in

the evaluation/accreditation processes. The main findings of the 2017 survey are based upon twenty-four procedures on accreditation of study directions, and due to be published in March 2018. However, the findings for both years were already analysed and presented to the higher education institutions and other stakeholders at seminars hosted on the 26 May 2017 and on the 8th February 2018.

AIKA also supported the development of a published article by the Chair of CAS and CLSP on “*Meeting employers’ expectations on employability competencies of higher education graduates*”. The article was based on the feedback received from the representatives of employers who had participated in assessment procedures carried out by the agency. It considered the employability competencies that are valued by employers, how employers see their involvement in higher education and what further quality assurance activities should be performed by HEIs to better meet employers’ expectations. The article was presented at the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) in November 2017.

Thematic analysis for the purpose of developing the external quality assurance system in Latvia

AIKA published a position paper in 2015 looking at options for the development and improvement of the Latvian higher education quality assurance system. This was a timely introduction given the status of a new agency and indicated an open awareness of further improvements required in Latvia. Other published papers included:

- “2017 Establishing a national quality assurance agency in the light of ESG 2015”
- an article submitted following a special invitation of the editorial board of the Journal of the European Higher Education Area (JEHEA) to be published in Spring 2018 (*currently in preparation and to be published in Spring 2018*). The panel did not look at these articles in detail as most were in Latvian.

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

The agency organises thematic seminars for institutions of higher education, experts and other stakeholders on the issues of quality assurance in higher education. The topics are directly related to the different standards of the ESG Part 1 and the content and outcomes of the seminars are elaborated in summary reports:

- the student-centred learning – situation in Latvian HEIs, published in 2017. (ESG 1.3
- internal quality assurance systems (ESG 1.1),
- design, approval, monitoring and revision of study programmes (ESG 1.2, ESG 1.9).

The seminar on student centred learning led to a national level survey conducted by AIKA and a report on the implementation of the student-centred learning and best practice is published on the website of the agency.

The agency has developed a *Plan and procedure for conducting thematic analyses* which was presented to the panel. In this plan they are introducing also the new type of thematic analyses which are not in place at the moment (analyses of the results of their EQA activities (which are not in place at the moment, due to objective reasons): Analyses of the results of the EQA activities based on expert reports, plans on the implementation of recommendations by the expert group and reports on the implementation of recommendations by the expert group.

Analysis

Formal documentation and discussion with stakeholders appears to demonstrate there is a culture and practice for system review, to evaluate and disseminate results.

The practical impact of analysis carried out by the agency was evident. The feedback gathered from stakeholders were summarised into one analytical report outlining recommendations for further EQA system improvements. A practical consideration of this analysis is the fact that the agency was able to initiate amendments to the Cabinet regulations based on this analysis. This in turn led to improvements to the procedures, methodologies for accreditation of study directions and licensing of study programmes.

The panel found that the HEIs and other stakeholders and experts were delighted to be asked to provide feedback for improvement. They also appeared to be aware of the improvement made. They were also very appreciative and complementary of the seminars provided by AIKA which closed the feedback loop and demonstrated where the findings could and would improve the existing processes and associated guidelines. They also had published outputs from these seminars.

The analysis and report on student centred learning is one of the most current topics presented by the new ESG 2015, with the students as co-creators challenging many long-standing agencies. All of the bespoke papers are tackling themes which have applicability across Europe. The employer's perspective and feedback is also considered to be a valuable input to the evaluation processes.

Results from the thematic seminars are a great start and it is understandable that not all publications are available due to the impact analysis aspect and timing of the review panel visit.

Although not every piece of evidence presented to the panel by AIKA was considered to be thematic analysis the panel did not expect to see as much comprehensive analysis given the workload of a new agency and the short amount of time which has elapsed. The panel recognises and commends the agency priority to focus on improving the external quality assurance procedures, methodology, criteria and implementation by using the feedback and analysis gathered from stakeholders (HEIs, experts including employers) and the standards and criteria set by ESG. However, the panel would also suggest that the agency in its future plans consider focusing more on analysing the development needs of the higher education system in Latvia based on the assessment reports highlighting the main areas of good practice and weaknesses or areas for improvement in the system.

However, AIKA have also identified this issue in the SWAT analysis presented on page 72-73 of the SAR.

Panel commendations

The panel commends the agency on taking up thematic analysis despite the heavy workload in a start-up context it also commends the agency for using the outputs to impact on system level improvement and amendment of the Cabinet Regulations.

Panel recommendations

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

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel encourage the agency to continue work on the plan for thematic analysis and in particular to articulate more clearly how all thematic analysis feeds back into the HE system in Latvia – the feedback loop.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard:

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

Evidence

AIKA resources are clearly set out in the SAR and in additional information provided to the panel by the executive. As discussed in a previous section AIKA financial resources come from a combination of the state grant (in 2017 - 36.4%) based on a negotiated budget, the fees charged by the agency for its accreditation process (in 2017 - 22.6%) (the price list is set in cabinet regulations) and a significant portion is from the ESF project (in 2017 - 41%) which is in place until 2019 (included). A small source of funding from other international projects was also referenced. Income from the state budget is fixed – at the moment it was 257,477 in 2015 and 2016, in 2017 it was 281,774 due to the fact that AIKA had a surplus by the end of 2016 and it was added to the fixed amount due for 2017.

Although AIKA is part of the larger organisation and the AIC Director signs off on the budget proposed by the Head of AIKA - quality assurance of higher education has its own individual line in the AIC budget separate to the other AIC activities. According to information provided to the panel *“All the financial decisions are taken at the level of department (AIKA) and are approved by the chairperson of the Board (Director of AIC). All the operational decisions are taken at the level of department and the chairperson of the Board (Director of AIC) is informed.”* In addition, the AIC Director assists the head of AIKA in any financial negotiations with the Ministry. The Director of AIC is responsible for the overall budget and AIKA benefits from this experience. There is an annual budget planning system in place and AIKA staff have worked closely with officials to come up with the “price list” for fees.

AIKA employs 11 permanent staff. Three additional staff members are working on the ESF project and 30% of the fees for the top three AIKA executives is funded by the ESF project. The agency coordinators (experts) that carry out the bulk of the accreditation process are highly qualified and there is an excellent mix of experienced and new staff. The balance of work in the job specifications is well considered with all experts taking on responsibility for other significant tasks in addition to the accreditation coordinator role. The workload ahead requires a good level of organisation. To date AIKA has completed 24 out of 200 outstanding accreditations (of study directions) which need to be completed by 2019.

The mentoring system in place for newer staff is working well and the agency benefits from other specialist positions in AIKA such as a lawyer and IT specialist. There is a monitoring arrangement in place to monitor workloads by the Deputy Director. A staff exchange, and observation system is in place to enable staff to observe activities in other agencies, in addition to conference attendance and seminars. The AIC staff provide accounting and tendering expertise required. AIKA also has the benefit of the knowledge and experience of the Director of AIC and the staff working on qualifications recognition. There are moves to ensure all Departments in the AIC are working more closely together.

As regards physical resources the office of the Agency is well located in the centre of Riga - Dzirnavu Street 16. There appears to be adequate space with a total AIC office space of the 606,2 m², of which 156,10 m² is the agency's premises. This comprises 7 workrooms, including one for the project team.

There is also a conference room with the capacity of 40 people (38,4 m2), where working meetings and small seminars are held.

Analysis

There is a significant workload on the agency which is without question. To date it has completed 24 out of 200 outstanding accreditation of study directions, which need to be complete by 2019. The workload is however in proportion to the size of the Latvian higher education system. The agency has made arrangements and proposed an alternative plan (and timeline) to the Ministry and other stakeholders to manage the workload over 3-4 years. Plans are already under way to offset any unrealistic work programmes. According to the proposed amendments to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education the new cycle will be prolonged until 2023.

The Ministry representatives were questioned by the panel with regard to any contingencies which may arise as costs for AIKA as a new agency, including any unforeseen costs. The panel was informed that such matters would be considered by the department when and if they arise in consultation with AIC/AIKA.

The high level of dependency on the ESF project funding was also questioned by the panel. However, the agency indicated that much of the work under development by the ESF project is related to sustainable capacity building. For example, they are related to establish systems and permanent infrastructure to make the work of the agency more streamlined, more electronic and more efficient; projects that will still be in place and fully established after the ESF project and its funding has ceased. One example is an information system (e-platform), which will serve both as a publicly accessible portal with information about the higher education system and assessment results as well as internal process management system (including modules for the staff of the agency, the experts and the CAS and CLSP). AIKA appear to have planned for this event.

The agency was also in a position to pay commission/bonus to staff in the most recent budget. AIKA is also allowed to hang on to any surplus arising from the state annual grant where the actual spend is lower than the budget.

The panel had no concerns about the financing and resources overall.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The agency should monitor the fixed price list going forward and keep the channel of communication open with the Ministry to ensure all process are realistic in the future and differences in scope planned are reflected in the costs or prices.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Standard:

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

Evidence

The agency has developed an integrated internal quality assurance system (Process and Measurement System (PMS) described in the SAR section 1.6.) with an associated quality manual and policy which is available on its website. This *Quality Management Manual* includes such things as the mission statement and the strategic objectives of the agency; the AIKA Quality policy; a change register form; the PMS system and a risk management plan.

The quality policy ensures that all persons involved in its activities are properly briefed and trained, follow the procedures and due processes set out and understand the strategic objectives which are translated down into the process descriptions. The PMS describes the main processes relating to the operation, management of the agency and support processes and measurements. The measurements are key to staff reflecting on the effectiveness of processes. All of the processes are represented in diagrams. The extent of the practice in terms of implementation is unclear as the *Quality Management Manual* has recently been reviewed and updated (December 2017).

Staff members are encouraged by management to reflect individually through the Quality Management System. Staff also meet and discuss their work together as a team each week. Collectively they gather issues that require improvement and exchange information.

The quality policy of the agency sets requirements for the quality as one of the top targets. This policy defines the quality level as the stage to which extent the agency's activities are able to meet regulatory requirements and standards, as well as the needs of stakeholders the panel did not consider this to be the best definition of quality or quality assurance.

There is a *Code of Ethics of AIC* which is impressive. The briefing and clarification provided by AIKA staff to HEIs and clarity around the process implementation, in addition to the fact that institutions may attend the CLSP and CAS for deliberations (without contribution towards the final outcome) enhances the trust and respect in the overall process.

The agency is considered to be completely accessible to its stakeholders. The stakeholders are also represented on the body which agrees and reviews progress on its strategy (HEQAC), so accountability is always close to the stakeholders. Stakeholders are very supportive of the agency and consider the work to have a high professional standard with integrity.

AIKA has collected a considerable amount of feedback on its work from its stakeholders. So far it has administered a number of surveys in 2016 and 2017 and carried out other feedback work for the thematic analysis plan. Following feedback AIKA made some improvements to improve its communication with stakeholders and institutions. The survey responses indicated positive feedback and overall satisfaction of stakeholders with AIKA's work. The panel received positive feedback on the professional conduct of the staff.

AIKA has organised a number of events and seminars to target particular issues with stakeholders and focus on particular trends and ESG topics. The agency has wasted no time in focusing in on issues and areas that the summary outcomes of the processes identify as problematic. Stakeholders are very supportive of the agency and consider the work to have a high professional standard with integrity.

Analysis

The internal quality assurance system is a new system and it is too early to say if it requires further work. The panel found at the interviews that AIKA staff were fully aware of the internal QA process and described it as an aid to self-reflection. The agency has taken an integrated approach towards this internal quality assurance system to match overall objectives. It certainly ensures that all persons involved in its activities are properly briefed and trained, understand and follow the procedures and due processes set out and reflect on how the measurement of the internal processes can suggest

improvement. It matches the overall objectives which are translated down into the job descriptions. All of the processes are represented in diagrams.

The quality policy of the agency and the way in which it defines quality as the level or extent to which the agency's activities are able to meet regulatory requirements and standards, as well as the needs of stakeholders - was not considered to be the best definition of quality or quality assurance.

Staff members are encouraged by management to reflect and meet and discuss their work together as a team each week - collectively gathering issues that require improvement. They are highly motivated and competent and extremely professional which is what the panel was told in almost every interview with external stakeholders that have experienced direct engagement with an AIKA evaluation process. It is clear to the panel that they act both professionally and ethically.

The review and improvement of AIKA's activities is ongoing and significant to date given its short time as an established agency. This is linked into the high level of respect from the stakeholders. The agency staff are driven to ensure that this new agency is not only ESG compliant but to ensure that their services to institutions and Latvia are fit for purpose objective, independent and optimal. There are clear internal and external feedback mechanisms that lead to a continuous improvement within the agency.

The code of ethics for professional conduct guards against intolerance of any kind or discrimination between staff.

The work of the agency to date and the professional conduct of staff is evidenced by the way the agency has established itself, with a high level of status and recognition from the institutions with which it conducts external quality assurance. AIKA staff are highly motivated and competent and extremely professional which is what the panel was told in almost every interview session with external stakeholders that have had direct engagement with an evaluation process. It is clear to the panel that they act both professionally and ethically with improvement as a core objective.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The agency should monitor the effectiveness of its internal quality system as it develops over time.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 3.7 CYCLICAL EXTERNAL REVIEW OF AGENCIES

Standard:

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

Evidence

This is the first formal external review of AIKA based on ESG 2015. The agency put a considerable effort into the process of preparation for this ENQA review. During the development of the self-evaluation report the agency has analysed publicly available self-evaluation reports of other European quality assurance agencies, decisions of ENQA and decisions of EQAR. In addition, the agency carried out on-site consultations SKVC -the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) as a preparation process for the real review. AIKA and its predecessor agency showed commitment to the EHEA. AIKA

has ensured that changes to the national legislation (Cabinet Regulations and Law on Institutions of Higher Education.) would support the fact that it is fully committed to the ESG.

Analysis

AIKA has demonstrated a firm commitment to the EHEA, the ESG and to internationalisation more generally. The AIC before AIKA had built up a considerable reputation nationally and internationally with the qualifications recognition and other similar functions. AIKA is very active with European and international networks. It is a member of the European Consortium for Accreditation, INQAAHE and CEENQA and is regularly engaged with the Baltic regional network. It has ensured that international experts are a significant part of the governance and evaluation processes. AIKA has been successful in attaining the ESF funded project which is providing significant resources for capacity building.

The stakeholders in the system are also actively proud of the national agency, eager to proclaim its independence from the state and anxious for the agency to receive European endorsement and recognition through the full membership of ENQA and EQAR. Although this is the first formal review of AIKA, it is clear to the panel that AIC and AIKA is highly committed to the ESG and to the EHEA. The panel is in no doubt of the agency’s commitment to undergo cyclical evaluations every 5 years.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

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

Evidence

There are three main quality assurance processes performed in Latvia - ***accreditation of a higher education institution (HEI), accreditation of study direction and licensing of study programme.***

AIKA has mapped the overarching criteria set for these three processes as it appears in

- the legislation – high level Cabinet regulations
- the evaluation methodologies developed by AIKA
- and guidelines developed by AIKA against the internal quality assurance elements described in part 1 of the ESG, 2015

Overarching criteria	Cabinet regulations No. 407 and No. 408
Assessment procedures	Assessment methodologies
Detailed criteria	Guidelines for the self-assessment reports and experts reports

(SAR page 28)

A full list of the documentation referenced is as follows:

- Law on Institutions of Higher Education
- Cabinet Regulations No. 407 “Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Institutions of Higher Education, Colleges and Study Directions” and Amendments to the regulation No.429
- Cabinet Regulations No. 408 “Regulations Regarding Licensing of Study Programmes” and Amendments to the regulation No.428
- Cabinet Regulations No. 409 “Price-list of the foundation “Academic Information Centre”
- The methodology for organising licensing of study programmes
- The methodology for assessing institutions of higher education/colleges
- The methodology for assessing study directions
- The guidelines for the preparation of an application for study programme licensing and description of study programme
- The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the experts for study programme licensing
- The guidelines for the preparation of a self-assessment report of study directions
- The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for study directions
- The guidelines for the preparation of a self-assessment report of institutions of higher education/ colleges
- The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for institutions of higher education/colleges

The panel referenced these documents - some of the most recent changes to the guidelines were not used as part of the evaluations and reports of outcomes considered by the panel. However, all of these guidelines have been approved and are ready for implementation and the HEIs have been consulted on their use with clarifying/briefing sessions.

The table below taken from the SAR shows in detail how the ESG Part 1 is reflected in the guidelines developed by AIKA for institutions preparing a self-assessment report and the guidelines developed for the report to be produced by the expert’s panel. The K1 references in the experts reports (or the I level for licensing of study programmes) shows the criteria set in Cabinet regulations whereas the K1.1 references the experts reports shows the detailed criteria (aspects) that are defined in the AIKA guidelines which are taken into account by the decision making committee(s) CAS and CLSP.

This evidence in the table below looks at how the ESG Part 1 standards 1.1 – 1.10 are addressed in the agency's criteria and processes for institutions/programmes.

Standard (ESG Part 1)	Licensing of study programmes	Accreditation of study directions	Institutional accreditation
<p>1.1. Policy for quality assurance</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> II.1. The management structure of the programme</p> <p>II.4. Internal quality assurance system II.5. Information about the possibilities to continue studies in case the study programme is closed down.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> II. Management of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section K1 (Aims and objectives of the study direction, compliance with the strategic development of the institution), sub-section K1.3 Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), sub- section K2.1., K2.7. Requirements for the section K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system), sub-section K.3.1, K3.2. Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), sub- section K5.1 Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.1. Requirements for the section K7 (Students self-government), sub- section K7.1, K7.2, K7.3 Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K1 (Aims and objectives of the study direction, compliance with the strategic development of the institution) K2 (Management of the study direction) K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system) K5 (Research and artistic creation) K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation) K7 (Students self-government) K8 (Recommendations received previously)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section 2 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, governance structure), sub-sections 2.1., 2.2., 2.3 Requirements for the section 3 (Internal quality assurance system), sub-sections 3.1. Requirements for the section 8 (Research and artistic creation), sub-section 8.1. Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-section 9.1. Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.1, 10.5. Requirements for the section 11 (The activities of the students self- government), sub-section 11.1, 11.2, 11.3.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K1 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, the governance structure), K5 (The internal quality assurance system) K7 (Research and artistic creation) K8 (Requirements of the labour market) K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation) K10 (The activities of the student’s self-government)</p>

<p>1.2. Design and approval of programmes</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>1.1. Development of the study programme 1.2 Compliance with the study direction and strategy of the higher education institution 1.3 Compliance with the tendencies in the sector 1.4 Development perspectives IV.1. Content of the study programme IV.2 Provision of the internship (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The expert's report:</u></p> <p>I. The reasoning for establishing the study programme and it's alignment with the strategy of the higher education institution II. Management of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K1 (The aims of the study direction, alignment with the strategic development of the institution), sub-sections K1.1, K1.2, K1.3, K1.4 Requirements for the section K2 (Management of the study direction), sub-section K2.2. Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), sub- section K5.2, K5.4, K5.6 Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.2., K6.5</p> <p>Requirements for the section K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements), sub-sections K9.1., K9.3. Requirements for the section K10 (Content of the studies), sub-sections K10.1, K10.2, K10.4, K10.8. Requirements for the section K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates), sub-sections K12.2.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K1 (Aims and objectives of the study direction, compliance with the strategic development of the institution) K2 (Management of the study direction) K5 (Research and artistic creation) K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation) K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements) K10 (Content of studies) K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 7 (Organisation and management of studies), sub-sections 7.1, 7.2 Requirements for the section 8 (Research and artistic creation), sub-section 8.1. Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-section 9.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K6 (Organisation and management of studies) K7 (Research and artistic creation) K8 (Requirements of the labour market)</p>
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<p>1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report</u> IV.3 Mechanism for implementing the study programme IV.4 Mechanism for implementing the study programme in e-learning (if applicable) IV.5 Research and artistic creation</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> IV. Content of the study programme and mechanism for implementing study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), sub- section K2.5., K2.6. Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), sub- section K5.5. Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.2., K6.3. Requirements for the section K10 (Content of studies, curricula), sub- sections K10.3</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K2 (Management of the study direction) K5 (Research and artistic creation) K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation) K10 (Content of studies, curricula)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section 7 (Organisation and management of studies), sub-sections 7.2. Requirements for the section 8 (Research and artistic creation), sub-section 8.1. Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.3 Requirements for the section 12 (Student support systems), sub- sections 12.1, 12.2</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K6 (Organisation and management of studies) K7 (Research and artistic creation) K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation) K11 (Student support systems)</p>
<p>1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> IV. Mechanism for implementing the study programme IV.4 Mechanism for implementing the study programme in e-learning (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), sub- section K2.3., K2.4</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K2 (Management of the study direction)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section 7 (Organisation and management of studies), sub-section 7.2 Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.4</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p>
	<p>IV. Content of the study programme and mechanism for implementing study programme</p>		<p><u>The experts report:</u> K6 (Organisation and management of studies) K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>
<p>1.5. Teaching staff</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> III.2.Teaching staff IV.5 Research and artistic creation</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section K4 (Resources and provision of study direction), sub-section K4.6</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u> Requirements for the section 6 (Staff), sub-sections 6.1, 6.2, 6.3 Requirements for the</p>

	<p><u>The experts report:</u> III. The resources and provision of the study programme</p>	<p>Requirements for the section K5 (Research and artistic creation), sub- section K5.3 Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.3 Requirements for the section K11 (Resources and provision of study programme), sub-section K11.1</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K4 (Resources and provision of the study direction) K5 (Research and artistic creation) K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation) K11 (Resources and provision of study programme)</p>	<p>section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.3</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K4 (Staff) K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>
1.6. Learning resources and student support	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>III.1. Financial resources III.3. Structural units and technical staff III.4. Infrastructure and material and technical resources III.5. Informative resources III.6. Methodological support III.7. Learning resources for e- learning (if applicable) III.8. Learning resources for studies in branches (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The experts report</u> III. The resources and provision of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K4 (Resources and provision of study direction), sub-section K4.1, K4.2, K4.3, K4.4., K4.5 (if applicable)</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K4 (Resources and provision of the study direction)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 4 (Infrastructure, material and technical provisions), sub-sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 Requirements for the section 5 (Resources), sub-sections 5.1., 5.2 Requirements for the section 12 (Student support systems), sub- sections 12.1, 12.2</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K2 (Infrastructure, material and technical provisions) K3 (Resources) K11 (Student support systems)</p>
1.7. Information management	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>V.1. Employment perspectives of the graduates</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.1., K6.2., K6.4.</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-section 9.1., 9.2, 9.3., 9.4</p>

	<p>V.2 Planned skills and competencies of the graduates</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> Employment perspectives of the graduates</p>	<p>Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements), sub-sections K9.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K10 (Content of the studies), sub-sections K10.5, K10.6, K10.7</p> <p>Requirements for the section K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates), sub-sections K12.1.</p> <p><u>The Experts report:</u> K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation) K8 (Recommendations received previously) K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements) K10 (Content of the studies) K12 (Perspectives of the employment of graduates)</p>	<p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.2, 10.3.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u> K8 (Requirements of the labour market) K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>
<p>1.8. Public information</p>		<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Covered by section 1.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system), sub-section K.3.1, K3.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements), sub-sections K9.1.</p> <p><u>The Experts report:</u></p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Covered by section 1. Requirements for the section 2 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, the governance structure), sub-sections 2.1., 2.2, 2.3.</p> <p>Requirements for the section 3 (Internal quality assurance system), sub-sections 3.1</p> <p><u>The Experts report:</u> K1 (The aims and objectives of the higher education institution, the governance structure)</p>

		<p>K3 (Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system)</p> <p>K9 (Compliance of the title of the study programme, degree, qualification, aims, objectives, admission requirements)</p>	<p>K5 (Internal quality assurance system)</p>
<p>1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>II.3. Involvement of the society in the design and continuous development of the programme</p> <p>II.4. Involvement of students in the design and continuous development of the programme</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>II. Management of the study programme</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K2 (Management of study direction), sub-section K2.2.</p> <p>Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K2 (Management of study direction) K8 (Recommendations received previously)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 9 (Compliance with the requirements of the labour market), sub-sections 9.2, 9.4</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K8 (Requirements of the labour market)</p>
<p>1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance</p>		<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section K6.6</p> <p>Requirements for the section K8 (Recommendations received previously), sub-section K8.1.</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K6 (Cooperation and internationalisation) K8 (Recommendations received previously)</p>	<p><u>Self-assessment report:</u></p> <p>Requirements for the section 10 (International cooperation and internationalisation), sub-section 10.6</p> <p><u>The experts report:</u></p> <p>K9 (International cooperation and internationalisation)</p>

Analysis

1.1 Policy for quality assurance

AIKA has procedures in place to check whether higher education institutions have a policy for quality assurance in place. This element is taken into account in the licencing of study programmes around the internal management of the programme and internal quality assurance system requested as part of the criteria for the self-assessment report. This process is part of the follow up under study direction.

The Accreditation of study directions refers to a range of criteria and policy that look at the effectiveness of internal QA, management, aims and objectives of the study direction and strategic development of the institution. Programme policy is evident.

Institutional accreditation looks at institutional level policy for the IQS with references to international cooperation employers and students referenced. All of the forms are made public and are part of the management of the HEI.

1.2 Design and approval of programmes

All three evaluation processes set the criteria, requests for information and requirements and development perspectives for the design development and compliance with external requirements and objectives such as labour market considerations. All of these requirements are reflected in the self-assessment report and output report of the expert. The programme detail reflects the qualification resulting from a programme and level of the national qualifications framework / Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

All three evaluation processes refer to mechanisms for implementation the programme and detailed content of the study programme – the institutional accreditation focusses more on the student support system, research and artistic creation. In licencing of study programmes the student-centred education principles and students' (planned) involvement in research activities are addressed. In accreditation of study directions, the most comprehensive approach towards student-centred teaching and learning is applied.

The focus on the student engagement and presence of the student panel members should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process.

1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification. The processes administered by AIKA refer to criteria around the implementation of the study programme including admission, content of the programme, outputs and the final qualification title, recognition and certification – although certification and terminology may differ.

1.5 Teaching staff

Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. The licencing processes refer directly to teaching staff while accreditation of study directions refers to the resources for the provision of the programme. Institutional accreditation has direct reference to staff in the criteria and reporting. The Cabinet regulations also specify a percentage of high-level staff competences depending upon the type of institution – College to University.

1.6 Learning resources and student support

A broad range of Institutional resources are referenced in many places for the self-assessment and reporting criteria final panel reports for the three processes. Financial, structural, methodological and

learning resources are referenced for the licencing of programmes with similar resources for study directions and infrastructure and other resources including support systems for students for institutional accreditation.

1.7 Information management

According to the standard 1.7, the institutions are required to ensure that they collect, analyse and present a range of relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities. AIKA in the table above indicates compliance with this standard by referring to the employment opportunities of graduates (licencing, Institutional Accreditation) and internationalisation/mobility data. The standard is not sufficiently covered in the case of institutional accreditation. Mapping the template for Licencing with employment of graduates is problematic as there are no students/graduates, so employment perspectives are only analysed based on surveys on labour market needs. The standard is sufficiently covered in accreditation of study directions, but a more strategic approach towards collecting, analysing and presenting different types of data (key performance indicators, profile of student population, student progression etc) should be introduced in all types of assessments (Institutional Accreditation) accreditation of HEIs).

1.8 Public information

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible. ESG 1.8 is addressed in both accreditation procedures (study directions and Institutional Accreditation). However, it is not addressed in licencing of a study programme (which is indicated in the AIKA table above). Institutions are not required to publish self-evaluation reports or panel reports for licencing of study programmes so there is little public information relating to this activity other than the criteria and methodology and report templates published by AIKA.

1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

This standard is well established in accreditation of study directions and licencing of programmes. However, it is not sufficiently addressed in Institutional Accreditation of HEIs, as this process was established as a once-off process and an ad-hoc process where HEIs commit violations. AIKA is referring in the table above (from the SAR) to requirements of the labour market for this standard however, for IA, the systematic approach towards periodic review of programmes as a part of the internal QA system seems to be missing.

External quality assurance requirements specify that HEIs in their internal procedures must “involve society (and students) in the design and continuous development of their programmes”. Periodic review by Institutions is in place to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and institutions respond to the recommendations from earlier accreditation processes. Institutional accreditation looks at the requirements of the labour market. Any action planned or taken following accreditation is set out in the general procedures and a plan is required to be submitted to AIKA for consideration as to the appropriateness of the proposed follow up for licencing and accreditation of study programmes. Follow up monitoring of evaluation processes is a crucial part of the internal and external quality assurance system and this seems to be very well understood by AIKA.

1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

Institutions under the remit of AIKA do undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis – the accreditation of study directions. However, the existing model of institutional accreditation is not active. At present, it is carried out only once (will be applied only in the case on new institutions or as extraordinary accreditation) and not considered to be cyclical.

In this section, the panel has considered each of the ESG Part 1 standards separately to analyse how AIKA is addressing the effectiveness of the HEIs' internal QA in newly developed guidelines for self-evaluation reports and expert reports.

The panel was unable to assess the expert reports or self-evaluation reports based upon the new guidelines established in 2017. However, the new guidelines and methodologies are already approved and presented to higher education institutions and implemented for recent assessment procedures.

The panel is satisfied that AIKA is addressing the criteria of ESG part 1 in a substantial way in their new guidelines for self-evaluation reports and expert reports. While the majority of ESG Part 1 standards are applied, the panel consider that AIKA have some journey to make in order to achieve real student-centred learning, in a more holistic way and consistently throughout all reports.

Panel recommendations

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 licencing the study programme.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

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

Evidence

One of the goals while developing the new guidelines was to reduce the workload of HEI-s and to improve the fitness for purpose of the agency procedures overall. The experience of the previous external quality assurance system which dates back to 1994 was taken into consideration when developing the existing system with more emphasis on the autonomy and responsibility of the HEIs. When AIC/AIKA took over the function of the quality assurance agency in 2015 they recognised that change was limited because the Cabinet regulations were prescriptive and included both the criteria for assessment and the structure and templates for the self-assessment reports and the expert reports.

In 2017, AIC proposed changes to the Cabinet regulations based on analysis of feedback from surveys of the HEIs and expert panel members This resulted in a delegation to AIC of the right to develop and approve the guidelines for external quality assurance procedures. The guidelines also address the workload of the HEIs. The guidelines were prepared in August - October 2017 and came into force and were published on 31st October 2017.

The agency says it is trying to *“move the system in Latvia from control-oriented quality assurance to an enhancement led approach, the guidelines put more emphasis on the analysis and self-assessment (not description of activities) performed by HEIs and allow the HEIs to demonstrate their improvements since the last assessment procedure.” “The templates for the expert reports are also more general and less descriptive in order to enable the analysis of each individual case, as well as to ensure that in addition to the set assessment framework, the experts are able to cover other aspects that they consider relevant”* – again making the system more fit for the specific context and purpose.

The purpose and objectives for each of the AIKA evaluation process are well defined and the procedures and methodology are clear and fully developed. The purpose of each procedure is also set out in the guidelines and report templates for each process.

AIKA has been active in providing briefings and clarification sessions prior to starting a review process or where updates have been applied and guidelines revised. All stakeholders, external reviewers and those being reviewed understand the purpose, the objectives and the methodology that is to be applied. The information provided to all is identical. All proposed amendments are consulted on in advance and then disseminated on the website, in seminars and in training sessions for experts. Even established panel members must come for training where any changes have been implemented as the panel was informed by experts during interviews. The revised ESG was one such occasion where all panel members were required to upgrade on training with AIKA.

Renewed methodologies for licensing of study programmes and accreditation of study directions were considered and approved by the committee(s) (CAS and CLSP) responsible for the approval of modifications for any existing methodologies. The methodology for accreditation of higher education institutions was approved by CHE. New guidelines for all assessment procedures were approved by AIKA.

The ESF project supported the organisation of 12 accreditations of study directions. The institutions did not have to pay a fee for these evaluations.

The current guidelines were developed in consultation with stakeholders, HEIs students and employers. This was evidenced when talking to the stakeholders and the agency were happy to provide any agendas for seminars provided and survey feedback is referenced on page 44 of the SAR. All evaluation procedures are performed in accordance with the national legislation and, international trends and with respect to ESG.

The agency has focussed on improvement and negotiated a new opportunity to amend the impact of the criteria stipulated in the Cabinet regulations. This is aimed at achieving a more fit for purpose approach and criteria expressed by the agency in the new guidelines on processes. This has resulted in a more aligned self-assessment report and the final panel report adding clarity and additional consistency, evidenced by the Surveys carried out on HEIs and experts.

Analysis

The stakeholders are involved at every level of proposed improvements and the starting point for AIKA recommendation for changes.

The overarching assessment criteria are still included in the Cabinet regulations. These state level regulations are somewhat prescriptive and include many quantitative requirements, for example specifying the number of experts in a panel. This is not dependent on the size or scope of the institution (study direction). Although the agency has and is doing its best to deregulate the high-level

criteria, they continue to have some small impact on the fitness for purpose, although they do not undermine it in any significant way.

Panel recommendations

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.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

AIKA should continue to seek more independence from those aspects of the Cabinet regulations that impact upon fitness for purpose.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard:

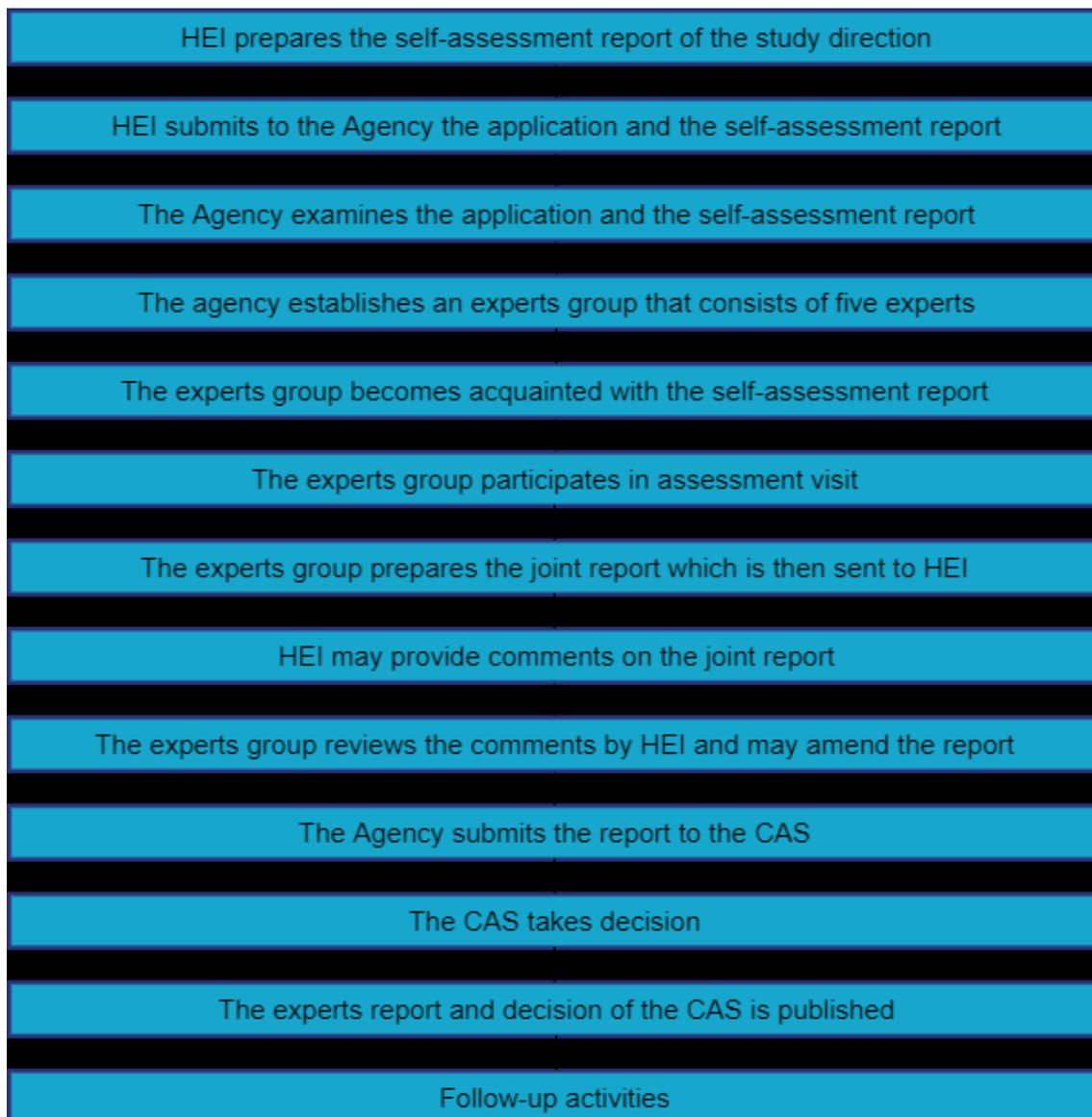
External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

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

Evidence

Evaluation processes in AIKA include high level criteria predefined in Cabinet Regulations (407-408 as set out above), descriptions of methodology and process and guidelines including templates for the preparation of focused self-evaluation reports by the HEIs and expert reports capturing the outcomes for the process with recommendations and conditions. AIKA’s role in coordinating the evaluation of the accreditation process is both captured in these published documents and internally for staff in the internal quality management manual – also published. Each accreditation process is set out in detail and in summary to provide clarity and consistency. For example, the table below (from the SAR page 18) represents a summary of the accreditation of study directions. Each process involves the different stages of accreditation, all are elaborated, pre-defined and guidelines and criteria are published. Implementation benefits from transparency of the process and it implies that more consistently is applied.

The stages of the Accreditation of a Study Directions is as follows: (SAR page 18)



The AIKA evaluation models all include the ESG recommended steps as follows:

- a self-evaluation report from the HEI
- a site-visit to the HEI to assess compliance with the evaluation criteria
- a designated committee makes an accreditation decision (for the Institutional Accreditation this is the external *Council for Higher Education*)
- an external review report is published on the website
- the appropriate register of accredited study programmes or equivalent is updated
- the agency has developed a policy for follow-up procedures for all processes (SAR page 46)

The factual accuracy check with HEIs for Licencing is not applied because the highly structured nature of the prescribed reports to a high level of detail, it is not considered necessary. Follow up for licencing is also captured in the follow-on accreditation of study directions. The criteria and standards are specified by the prescribed structure of the self-evaluation report and content which needs to be presented as part of the process.

Consistency of the process is facilitated by AIKA in a variety of ways. The briefings provided to the HEIs clarifying preparation on self-evaluation criteria and process to support them in their internal QA processes and in their preparations towards external QA. The selection and training of panel members is a careful process involving a conceptual focus on criteria and procedures and a practical scenario training. The AIKA expert coordinators provide support to the panel and HEI and the same information is open to all to interpret. The coordinator attends the site visit to assist with further interpretation of criteria and to observe the process and performance of all. The coordinators report back to each other and the Deputy Head during frequent meetings to capture any trends, issues and legal advice is available if necessary. AIKA organises follow on workshops and seminars to focus on follow-up. HEIs are required to prepare follow-up plans. Additional surveys capture feedback which may also highlight and inconsistencies.

The coordinator also attends the committee deliberations and the HEI representatives are also invited to attend and to listen to the deliberations and express their opinion on factual aspects only. There is no impact on the final decision, as this is made without third parties present.

After receiving the accreditation decision, HEIs are expected to prepare and develop an action plan specifying a timeframe and responsible individuals to implement the recommendations as set in the external report. The process coordinator will look at/comment on the adequacy of the action plan prior to the HEI formalising and submitting to AIKA. The responsibility to monitor the follow-up is with the HEI on an annual basis. The timeline for follow up is dependent upon the outcome of the accreditation, for example, a two-year approval for study accreditation requires a 6-month follow-up report. In the event of non-compliance with recommendations (not followed by HEIs) the agency can inform the Committee with a view to taking further action.

The panel found that all stakeholders and staff have a clear and consistent understanding of the evaluation processes. HEIs are complimentary of the support on content and process they receive from coordinators and the new templates are all closely aligned to the final reports. This is all evidenced in the survey feedback presented to the panel (SAR page 44), the detailed reports considered by the panel and feedback during interviews with the HEIs and other stakeholders. However, there seems to be a series of follow-up requirements for HEIs with the Ministry as well. Every year, following the accreditation, the institution of higher education or the college shall prepare a report on the actions taken to improve the study direction and publish it on their website.

Analysis

External quality assurance is carried out professionally, consistently and transparently by AIKA and stakeholders seem satisfied and accepting of the outcomes.

The findings of the evaluation processes are all provided in clear reports. The assessment criteria have recently been reduced and a new grading system has been put in place to make the analysis less onerous and more integrated – quantitative system to a qualitative system to assist with over all outcome determination – this was changed following feedback and the panel could see this was a very positive change for experts producing reports adding to consistency. The most critically evaluated aspects according to a survey carried out by AIKA were the following – *overregulation by legislative acts, the structure of the self-assessment report and the structure and clarity of the template for the experts' report*. AIKA staff indicated that these aspects were addressed in actions that the agency addressed in summer 2017 and the resulting amendments referred to previously were approved in the Cabinet regulations. The impact of these amendments will be monitored by AIKA going forward.

AIKA has deliberate and consistent follow-up process for considering the action taken by the institutions and this is also a welcome process to allow the HEIs to reflect on what they are doing and to listen to other HEIs and their follow up. All reports looked at by the panel provided clear actions required for follow up. The nature of the follow-up depends on the type of external quality assurance process. AIKA recently produced a *policy* on follow up to try and consolidate the outcomes of the different processes.

AIKA should consider more closely the timing and impact of other reporting requirements on the HEIs and to ensure this is not too much of a burden for the HEIs.

Panel commendations

The panel commends the clarity and transparency of the new guidelines and the roles and place of all stakeholders and actors in the accreditation processes; observers, ministry or professionals, HEIs present at committee meetings, this all assists in the further development of a culture of independence with clear and objective decision-making.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel recommend that AIKA consider the totality of burden on the follow up required of HEIs by the Ministry and AIKA and try to ensure a more integrated follow up if appropriate. HEIs have to publish an annual report on their website describing the improvement activities they have made. AIKA should find the way to reduce the reporting burden of HEIs and avoid the duplication.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

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

Evidence

Approach

AIKA has established a considered approach to the selection and training of experts including general principles outlining the work of experts (page 52 of the SAR). There is a framework for selecting the experts, establishing and composing the expert panels and working with them. The agency involves international experts in two of the assessment procedures (accreditation of a study direction and assessment of a HEI). The composition of expert panel also includes students nominated from the Student Union of Latvia and the employers' representatives nominated by the Employers' Confederation of Latvia. In addition, observers to panels are nominated by the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees and the Student Union of Latvia.

AIKA has developed general competencies that must be covered by the experts group procedures for selecting experts for an assessment procedure. This is all set out in the *Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts*. Continuity and experience is captured by including a panel member from a previous assessment process where possible.

Approval

Not all experts are proposed by AIKA. Student and employer experts are nominated/proposed by the respective representative organisation - the Student Union of Latvia and the Employers' Confederation of Latvia. AIKA may decline the experts nominated by these organisations and ask for a new nomination if there is a certain justification for doing so. All expert groups, except those required for assessing changes in study direction, are approved by AIKA. The experts for assessing changes in study directions are currently the only experts who are approved by CAS (according to Cabinet Regulations No. 407). However, this issue is addressed in the agency's current improvement activities. International experts are a common part of panels for Institutional Accreditation and Accreditation of Study directions.

Currently 20% of the experts involved in all four assessment procedures between 2015 and 2017 have been from abroad:

The number of experts from Latvia and abroad Experts

Experts from Latvia	197
Experts from abroad	47
Total	244

(SAR page 48)

Training

Two types of training are in place, the more generic training of experts and the more specific training which occurs before the on-site assessment visit to the HEI. Training is provided by the AIKA staff. The general training takes place during the academic year and covers a wider range of topics. It provides more general information and insight into all assessment procedures performed by AIKA; a general insight into the higher education system; quality assurance of higher education, and explanation on the ESG 2015.

Selection of experts

AIKA took over a legacy Database of Experts established by the Ministry for Education and Science when they took over the accreditation/assessment processes between 2012-2015. This database was refreshed by writing to experts to determine their status and updating any details and credentials. It is now the main source for selecting appropriate experts for the assessment procedures. However, AIKA also has an open process for adding new experts recommended for example, by other QA agencies, employer organisations, student organisations and other HE policy makers and partners. There is a detailed form to be completed by these experts which the panel considered, and any new experts are then added to the database. Conflict of interest procedures and documentation are in place for all panels and observer.

Analysis

The approach to selection and recruitment of panel members is considered and well planned. The approach to the training of the experts is also well thought out with two parts and role playing which is difficult to manage. Experts are required to refresh their training, even those that are very experienced and with the agency/legacy agency a long time as the panel discovered when talking to these experts. With the establishment of the new ESG in 2015 all experts were required to submit to training and update their knowledge. To date there have been two general trainings (in spring 2017 and autumn 2017) with a total of 123 expert participants trained, including experts delegated by the Student Union of Latvia and Employers' Confederation of Latvia.

The observer practice is considered to be very positive by all stakeholders with guidelines for engagement and processes for appointment and rules for panel engagement. Opportunities for training future panel members was referenced in many interviews with institutions and other stakeholders.

Appointment is not fully under the control of the agency, with nominations coming from two external bodies, however, AIKA carry out the training for these representatives and they are also entitled to seek alternatives if any nominations are deemed unsuitable.

AIKA has established a significant core of external quality assurance experts with the maintenance of the Database of Experts and a wide range of international experts whom the panel were very impressed with. Such experts are contributing to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives and surveys carried out by AIKA. The views of local experts are extremely valuable and also play a considerable developmental role. The inclusion of students both as observers and employers is another key aspect of the AIKA system that is commendable and supporting ESG. With such a broad organised approach to the selection and engagement of experts, the agency has demonstrated their commitment to enriching the role of their own institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of the evaluation processes.

The panel is also confident that agency ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism of no conflict-of-interest.

AIKA has ensured that processes where possible involve the maximum number of international experts in expert panels and the experts that the panel interviewed, considered it essential to have local experts and coordinators to support local knowledge. External quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels.

Panel commendations

The panel would like to commend the establishment but also the maintenance of the Database of experts and the overall approach to recruiting training and engagement of the experts.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard:

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

Evidence

Levels and types of criteria

As mentioned previously there are different levels of criteria for decision making purposes:

Overarching criteria	Cabinet regulations No. 407 and No. 408
Assessment procedures	Assessment methodologies
Detailed criteria	Guidelines for the self-assessment reports and experts reports

All criteria are published and the methodology for each process together with guidelines developed by AIKA are another opportunity for the agency to reiterate the criteria in the report templates and final report outcomes adding consistency to the overall process. While the reports provide information on the published criteria there is much less on formal policies for ensuring consistency of application. Although the work of both the individual expert coordinators for each HEI and collectively as a team adds to the consistency of application but on an informal basis. The AIKA lawyer is also available to provide any legal opinions thereby providing a different type of consistency for AIKA on the interpretation of the inputs and outputs from the processes.

Consistency of the process is facilitated by AIKA in a variety of ways. The briefings provided to the HEIs which clarify preparation required on self-evaluation criteria and the process to support them in their internal QA processes and in their preparations towards external QA. The selection and training of panel members is a careful process involving a conceptual focus on criteria and procedures and a practical scenario training. The AIKA expert coordinators provide support to the panel and HEI and the same information is open to all to interpret. The coordinator attends the site visit to assist with further interpretation of criteria and to observe the process and performance of all. The coordinators report back to each other and the Deputy Head during frequent meetings to capture any trends, issues and legal advice is available if necessary. Additional surveys capture feedback which may also highlight any inconsistencies.

The Committee deliberations and the additional criteria around added expert opinions on professional regulatory standing (other) which may impact on the final decision of the committee are not captured for published dissemination. These could be considered to be 'silent' criteria.

At present, there is a difference between assessment criteria applied in the expert reports and the criteria described in the guidelines for accreditation, as the new guidelines were developed based on the feedback from experts and higher education institutions in 2017. In the reports the 1...4 scale (1= minimum requirements not met, 4=excellent) all criteria are assessed separately. For example, in the case of accreditation of study directions there were 32 different sub-criteria to be assessed at the study direction level and 19 at the programme level. Some of the criteria are very broad (1.4. Is the management of the implementation of the study process effective for reaching the aims set for the study direction? Is it democratic, with clearly defined obligations and the responsibility of the administrative staff, the academic staff, and students?). Some of the criteria are very specific, for example, 3.5 - Are topics of the scientific research work or creative work of the students relevant and related to the content of the study direction and respective study programmes?. According to the interviews with experts there was no set of rules for how experts should arrive at the final decision of

accreditation for 6 years, or 2 years or a negative outcome. However, the agency has managed to gain some autonomy in developing their own guidelines for reports and the review team was assured that the new templates are excellent tools for increasing the transparency of decision making.

The decisions made by expert panels are proposals for final (formal) decisions in CAS/CLSP and in the Council of Higher Education. According to the Methodology for Assessing Study Directions which was in force until 20 December 2017 (Clause 47):“ the *Accreditation Committee shall decide on the accreditation of the respective study direction and the duration thereof on the basis of the opinion on the compliance of the study direction with legal requirements, the joint report by the group of experts, the information provided by the State Education Quality Service and certification institution, if such information exists, and other information available for the Accreditation Committee. If necessary, the Accreditation Committee shall inspect the actual conditions at the institution of higher education/college and review other information at the disposal of the Accreditation Committee*“. In the new methodology the wording of the corresponding clause (17.4) is slightly different, but the content remains the same. Thus, there are other information sources used by the Committee for final decisions which are not available to the expert panel and will impact on the final outcome of the assessment procedure. To date there has been one case where the Committee has made a different decision to the proposed decision recommended by the expert panel. The outcome resulted in accreditation for 6 years instead of 2 years. The possibility for making a different decision should be highlighted in the methodology. There are two possible reasons for a different decision: 1) the committee may decide that the expert panels final decision is not in accordance with the content of the assessment report, e.g. it is not evidence based against criteria and/or it is lacking adequate arguments; 2) the additional information the Committee gets from the different parties may affect the decision making process. In the first case – the expert panel could be given an opportunity to “reconsider or re-assess“ their proposal and/or highlight some additional deliberations and rationale for their decision for the committee. In the second case – the additional information the committee has used for the final decision should be made publicly available together with the report, for example, as an additional section included in the report or as a separate document.

The impact of decisions

There are different types of outcomes for each evaluation process:

- Licensing of the study programme outcomes:
 - Licensed
 - Not licenced

(The criteria for taking decisions are listed on Cabinet regulations No. 408 and the criteria for refusing the license are set in the Law on HEI.
- Accreditation of the study directions outcomes:
 - Refusal of accreditation
 - Accreditation for 2 years
 - Accreditation for 6 years

(Criteria for taking decisions are set in Cabinet regulations No 407 and the criteria for refusing accreditation are set in the Law on HEI.
- Institutional Accreditation
 - Accredit
 - Not Accredit

(Criteria for taking decisions are set in Cabinet Regulations No 407 and the criteria for refusing accreditation are set in the Law on HEI)

The outcomes are significant in cases where the HEI does not receive accreditation or a licence. AIKA has dealt with refusals and these are significant impacts for the HEIs.

The panel spoke to some HEIs during the site visit that received accreditation of the study directions for only 2 years instead of 6 years. Although this has an impact on the institution and it will cost the institution more for an additional process of accreditation after two years the institutional representative was quietly confident that the programme was a more robust and better programme as a result of the focus on follow-up with the shorter timeframe of 6 months. The fact that the HEI can attend the committee meeting and observe the discussions on the reports makes the process and interpretation of criteria very open. It is particularly useful to observe why certain conditions are attached to some final decisions.

Analysis

There is no doubt that the external quality assurance evaluations managed by AIKA have a significant impact on the institutions and there is evidence that they add to the value of programmes developed even up to the final point of deliberation (by the CAS/CSLP) they are being evaluated and judged. The final committee deliberations appear to have some undefined criteria that AIKA may be interested in articulating.

The outcomes of the AIKA evaluation processes are based on predefined and published criteria, which are interpreted consistently and are evidence-based.

The methodologies 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 bodies should provide the panels with feedback on the consistency of the reports to avoid discrepancies.

Panel recommendation

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

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

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

Evidence

AIKA has designed *proforma* standard assessment report templates for all accreditation/ assessment procedures. These are supported by the guidelines set out below. The existing assessment report templates were revised recently based on the feedback from the surveys of HEIs and experts:

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

The process of developing the reports and provision of prescribed templates adds to the consistency. The reports when submitted to AIKA by an expert panel are considered internally by the coordinator responsible for the accreditation process and one other expert member of staff. The depth of report and clarification of the criteria attained is the main consideration as the AIKA executive will not seek to influence the panel decision in any way. The report then goes to the HEI for factual accuracy testing and then back to the expert panel for amendment or not. All of these comments and feedback are added to the final report and presented to the committee for consideration. The panel noted that the minutes of the Committees are not published at present.

Many stakeholders referred to the clarity of the new proposed reports templates and alignment of the self-assessment reports with the outcomes of the final panel reports. The report of the expert panel is the basis for the Committee consideration CAS/CLSP and the final follow-up action required by the evaluation process. The process of decision making by the Committee (CAS/CLSP) allows for additional expert opinions to be heard by the committee on professional regulatory requirements and other aspects of expertise associated with the new proposed programmes under consideration. These additional opinions are not captured in the reports but in correspondence to the HEI along with the final report.

The panel considered a range of reports. They provide information on the institution and the breakdown of the programmes under consideration. There was only one report on Institutional Accreditation and this was quite detailed. The panel members are all identified, and the evidence, analysis and findings and conclusions are focused on whether the criteria are reached or satisfied by the programme content. The AIKA evaluation/assessment methodology and criteria were condensed and rationalised in the most recent set of improvements. The indicative grading scheme for grading the final outcome of a process was also changed to reflect more qualitative grading and reports were available to the panel to consider both the old and new assessment methodology. The recommendations for action and follow-up are clear however the rationale for the decisions are not always clear in the reports themselves. As referred to in 2.5 above there are other information sources used by the Committee for final decisions which are not available to the expert panel and may impact on the final outcome of the assessment procedure. Although this has only resulted in one case where the Committee has made a different decision to the proposed decision of the expert panel, the additional information considered by the committee is not currently captured by the existing reports.

All reports are published and accessible. AIKA has established a register of Study Directions or *Study Direction Register*. This hold:

- the information/report on the quality assessment procedures conducted by AIKA
- the self-assessment reports of the HEIs,
- the final expert reports endorsed by the committees (CAS/CLSP)
- the formal decisions for licensing/ accreditation.

This is a query data base whereby stakeholders and society can query it to see if a particular HEI has an accredited programme in a particular study direction. This was available for the panel to look at. Information on the Register is also available in English (for accreditation of study directions) which is a credit to the agency.

Analysis

Overall the panel is confident that AIKA is doing its best to produce consistent reports that focus on the correct criteria and provide valuable information. The additional opinions on professional regulatory and other requirements which may influence the decision of the committee are not captured in the reports. They are referenced but only in correspondence to the HEI along with the final report. The overall rationale for the decision is not always obvious in the final reports. While reports are published, easy to find and to query on the internet and transparent enough, they could provide more information on the rationale or analytical side of the decision made. The minutes of the Commission (CAS/CSLP committees) are not published and there is currently no way of knowing why a committee may overturn the recommendation of an expert panel – even though this only occurred in one case to date.

AIKA should also be congratulated for their efforts in retrospectively publishing old reports.

Panel recommendations

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

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel recommends that the minutes of the committee (CAS/CSLP) deliberations may be published to provide more information on its deliberations and additional clarity and transparency.

Panel conclusion: substantially compliant

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard:

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

Evidence

All HEIs have an opportunity to comment on the factual accuracy of the report of the evaluation process with the exception of the licencing of study programmes. The rationale for not sending the licencing reports is due to the strict parameters of facts in this prescribed report. However, for all procedures the agency will inform the higher education institution about the date and time of the CAS/CLSP meeting during which the respective decision will be made. Also, one or two representatives from the higher education institution may be delegated to the meeting of the CAS/CLSP.

There is a standard procedure established by AIKA for receiving any incoming letters (including complaints) or documents. A different timeline for dealing with complaints has been introduced depending upon the format of receipt of the complaint – five days for email complaints and one month for formal written correspondence. AIKA has only ever received two complaints and both were resolved by the executive through correspondence and dialogue with the institution. HEIs can also reject potential panel members on the basis of conflict of interest and they have received a few requests of this nature – some of which have been upheld, but not all.

Appeals are dealt with by the legislation. The Cabinet Regulations prescribe that the decisions taken by the committee for accreditation of study directions (CAS) and the committee for licencing of study programmes (CLSP) may be contested in the Centre (i.e. AIC). The appeals decision of the Centre (AIC) may be appealed in court according to the procedure set by the Administrative Procedure Law. In the case of institutional accreditation the decision made by the external body - the Council of Higher Education - may be contested in the Ministry of Education. The decision made by the Ministry of Education can be contested in a court of law according to the procedure set by the Administrative Procedure.

The Appeals Procedure has been introduced by AIC, and was elaborated by AIKA staff. It was approved by the chairperson of AIC.

The Appeals Committee is established by the order of the chairperson of AIC separately for each appeal. The main principles governing the establishment and composition of the appeals committee is the absence of a conflict of interest and the essence of the appeal. The Appeals Procedure of Appeals Committee (clause 17) describes the circumstances in which a conflict of interest may arise, e.g. the Appeals Committee member has taken part in the process of accreditation or licencing within which the appealed decision has been taken; or performs duties in the higher education institution which submitted the appeal; or provides services on a contract basis in the institution which has submitted the appeal.

The AIC staff involved in the evaluation process can only be invited to the appeals process to provide necessary factual information. Other AIC employees including the Chairperson of the AIC Board may be involved in the appeals procedure as members of the Appeals Committee. The Chairperson of the AIC Board has the right to take part as an observer in the meetings of the Appeals Committee if she is not a member of the respective Committee (according to the clause 24 of the Appeals Procedure of Appeals Committee).

The committee's decision will come into force after its signing by all Committee members who have participated in the voting.

The conclusion on the justification of the appeal will be submitted to the Chairperson of the AIC Board who will take the final decision on the appeal case. The institution may appeal the decision of the Chairperson of the AIC Board in court.

To date, only one appeal has been received by AIC. In this particular case, a HEI only contested a part of the final decision of the CAS about the right to award a certain qualification. The appeals committee established by the chairperson of AIC consisted of AIC staff members whose daily responsibilities are related to the recognition of qualifications. All staff of AIC work together on the same floor of the building and they have some shared services.

The chairperson of the AIC reviewed the conclusion of the Appeals Committee and made the final decision on the appeal. The written appeals decision was prepared by an external independent Lawyer not involved in the business of the AIC. The decision of the chairperson of AIC was sent to the appellant

who decided against any further action despite the fact that they had the right to appeal the decision in court (according to the procedure prescribed in the Administrative Procedure Law).

The panel looked at all of the documentation around the appeals procedure, the report of the final decision and also had an opportunity to interview the Chair of the appeals committee and representatives of the HEI that made the appeal.

Analysis

There are clear procedures for dealing with complaints in accordance with the internal procedures for receiving any incoming letters or documents implemented by the agency. The institutions are informed about the possibilities for making complaints and appeals. They have an additional opportunity to understand and question the conclusions and justifications of the expert panel while participating in CAS/CLSP meetings.

The right to appeal the final decision is clearly stated in the Cabinet Regulations as well as in the methodologies designed by the agency and communicated to the higher education institutions. However, the process of taking decisions on an appeal refers to how the committee will be established as an independent committee. The panel considered that the perception of independence in this context is just as important. In this regard, the panel considers that it cannot be good practice by AIC to involve its own employees in the appeals process, as staff of AIC and AIKA are employed by the same organisation and work together in the same location. Therefore, from the panel's point of view, the impartiality of the appeals process is partly undermined. It is a well-known maxim that "justice must not only be done but be seen to be done".

In addition, the appeals process described in the AIC document does not clarify what would happen if the Chairperson of the AIC Board were to decide in favour of the institution making the appeal. According to the Cabinet Regulations, the CAS committee has the power to make administrative decisions in the case of accreditation of study directions and licencing of study programmes. It should be clearly articulated in the agency procedures how the appeal decision made by Chairperson of the AIC Board, and based upon the Appeal Committee's conclusion, will affect the accreditation decision made by CAS/CLSP committee.

The panel does not in any way question the integrity of the process or the impartiality of the decision in the only appeals case the agency has encountered. The evidence presented in the minutes of the Appeals Committee and in the conclusion was solid. However, the perception of a potential conflict may be something that arises in the future, if the appeals process continues to include staff working for the same organisation as those staff who facilitated and managed the process responsible for the initial decision contested in the appeal.

Panel recommendations

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 independent objective decision-making process. This should include description in the respective document on the impact of the appeal decision made by the Chairperson of AIC on the accreditation decision of CAS/CLSP.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

The panel suggests that the agency considers sending draft reports on the licencing of study programmes to the higher education institutions for comments in order to ensure the factual accuracy

of the final expert reports are correct and to prevent any possible mismatches between the content of the (published) expert report and the decision made by the CLSP.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

The panel commends the efforts of AIKA to date in negotiating the amendments to the Cabinet Regulations and the significant groundwork achieved since 2015 in striving towards ESG compliance with the cooperation and trust of the higher education system.

ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

The panel found the commitment of the Ministry staff to the independent agency to be extremely encouraging.

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The panel commend the agency on taking up thematic analysis despite the heavy workload in a start-up context and commend the agency for using the outputs to impact on system level improvement and amendment of the Cabinet Regulations.

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

The clarity and transparency of the new guidelines and the roles and place of all stakeholders and actors in the accreditation processes, observers, ministry or professionals, HEIs present at committee meetings this all assists in the further development of a culture of independent clear and objective decision-making.

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

The panel would like to commend the establishment but also the maintenance of the Database of experts and the overall approach to recruiting training and engagement of the experts.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The panel found that AIKA's performance against the ESG was fully compliant in 6 standards and reflecting in some standards the thorough approach the agency has taken to try to ensure compliance with ESG. The 7 standards that the agency was found to be substantially compliant reflect to a large extent the external stakeholder influences and Cabinet regulations that the agency is working with and the evolving nature of that early stage work with the higher education system. The panel found the agency to be partially complaint in one standard - 2.7 Appeals and Complaints - where more work is required by the agency to ensure the processes are fully articulated and are seen to be completely above question when it comes to objectivity and independence. It is important that this agency is seen to avoid all possible opportunities for a conflict of interest even if they are only perceived. A Summary list of judgements are as follows:

- Fully compliant for the following ESGs – 3.2, 3.5,3.6, 3.7, 2.3, and 2.4
- Substantially compliant in the following ESGs- 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, and 2.6
- Partially compliant: 2.7 Appeals and Complaints

A summary of the recommendations for AIC/AIKA include:

Substantially Compliant

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.

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.

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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

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 licencing the study programme.

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.

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 or discrepancies occur.

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.

Partially Compliant

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.

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, AIC/AIKA is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Specific suggestions for further Improvement

ESG 3.1 ACTIVITIES, POLICY, AND PROCESSES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

The panel recommends that AIKA should further enhance the quality improvement agenda by providing some core definitions for the higher education system. The definition of 'quality and "Quality Assurance" could be a useful place to commence this work by establishing a broader agency policy on quality assurance. This could also provide even further definition and explanation on the demarcation of responsibilities between internal and external quality assurance.

ESG 3.2 OFFICIAL STATUS

If it is the intension to further establish the AIKA brand as a separate function or quasi agency (under AIC) more effort is required on branding activities. The branding of AIKA still lives in the shadow of AIC. The panel suggests that AIKA is branded with more visibility of the agency supported by external communications; a plan or strategy with defined target groups both national and international.

At the very least the panel would like to see more clarity over which agency is and should be referred to when representing Latvia abroad, communicating with international experts and general engagement. Although the local audience referred mostly to AIC the SER referred to AIKA so it was more confusing to an outside international audience.

ESG 3.4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The panel encourage the agency to continue work on the plan for thematic analysis and in particular, to articulate more clearly how all thematic analysis feeds back into the HE system in Latvia – the feedback loop.

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

The agency should monitor the fixed price list going forward and keep the channel of communication open with the Ministry to ensure all processes are realistic in the future and differences in scope planned are reflected in the costs or prices.

ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

The agency should monitor the effectiveness of its internal quality system as it develops over time.

ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

AIKA should continue to seek more independence from those aspects of the Cabinet Regulations that impact upon fitness for purpose.

ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

The panel recommend that AIKA consider the totality of burden on the follow required of HEIs by the Ministry and AIKA and try to ensure a more integrated follow up if appropriate. HEIs have to publish an annual report on their website describing the improvement activities they have made. AIKA should find a way to reduce the reporting burden of HEIs and avoid the duplication.

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

The panel recommends that the minutes of the committee (CAS/CSLP) deliberations may be published to provide more information on its deliberations and additional clarity and transparency.

ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

The panel suggests that the agency considers sending draft reports on the licencing of study programmes to the higher education institutions for comments in order to ensure the factual accuracy

of the final expert reports are correct and to prevent any possible mismatches between the content of the (published) expert report and the decision made by the CLSP.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The panel would like to congratulate the agency staff on the establishment of the agency and significant work achievements of AIKA to date. The starting point for a new agency is difficult in most national contexts. However, AIKA has managed to take on a quality assurance function from a legacy situation which was not entirely positive. The gratitude and support of the main local stakeholders and the professional reputation developed to date in a short amount of time is an extremely promising start for the agency. In addition, the agency has managed to ensure the depth and breadth of stakeholder involvement including the student input, international peers; the professional regulatory view and employers.

The staff of the agency are high level professionals who share the underlying principles and values of European higher education and quality assurance and are implementing them in the Latvian context according to the level of development of higher education, the local needs and national priorities. Therefore, the panel consider it necessary to emphasize the intrinsic role of the agency in the development of higher education in Latvia and the importance of expanding the professional independence of the agency.

The panel would also like to make some general and more detailed suggestions, extending beyond strictly interpreted ESG and/or linking several ESG, which AIC/AIKA may wish to consider when reflecting on its further development. Some of them have already been signalled in the previous sections:

In recognising the professional and coordinated team approach of the agency staff and the respect and value this approach has achieved for the agency; the panel would urge AIKA to consider establishing a more systematic personal development programme combined with continuing professional development for the agency staff.

The panel recognises the fact that the agency is still at an early stage of development in a changing and evolving context. It has built up an efficient and close working relationship with the Ministry for education and the panel considers this relationship to be supportive. The meeting with the Ministry indicated to the panel that officials have a clear understanding of changes which are required for further success on the QA landscape. The Ministry appear to see themselves as co-owners in the development of the Latvian higher education system along with the agency and other core stakeholders. The panel would encourage AIKA and the Ministry to maintain this efficient and supportive working relationship as a priority in the future.

The operating environment for AIKA is one which could be described as highly regulated. Some of the more typical features of a quality assurance system are, for AIKA, captured in high-level Cabinet regulations. The agency has made progress towards moving the emphasis from control to enhancement by negotiating changes to these regulations which subsequently placed additional responsibility on the HEIs. Added to this is the agency effort towards diminishing the volume of preparation in SERs for the HEIs. The panel would encourage the agency to continue to diminish as much duplication and burden on the HEIs as possible and consider looking at avoiding overlap or creating some synergies between the agency annual reporting requirements for HEIs and the annual reporting requirements or returns the HEIs are also required to make for the Ministry for education and Science. The panel also encourage AIKA to continue working on improvements to make the methodologies more fit-for-purpose with a focus on each individual evaluation procedure and at the same time to focus on the total impact of all procedures to avoid any policy gaps or overlaps.

The panel also endorses the move to institutional accreditation as the key quality assurance instrument, as indicated by AIKA executive and the Ministry representatives during the interviews. The panel considers this to be a very important development as it will place this important function within the AIC/AIKA QA framework and take it away from the more government orientated Council of Higher Education. Such a move will ensure that this quality assurance instrument will be more holistic in approach and in line with European and wider international good practice. It may also serve to reduce the burden on the HEIs further and any existing overlap between the suite of QA processes. The system level developments in Latvia are still to emerge as recognised in the agency plan for thematic analysis. The panel considers that future developments for system analysis and improvements could focus on an internal comparative analysis of quality thresholds achieved across higher education institutions in Latvia. The feedback from the international panel members was to consider benchmarking exercises that could provide insights into comparisons on important thematic topics with institutional support. The panel agrees with this suggestion and would like to add that the agency could compliment this work by providing a more guided definition of terminology for quality in higher education, quality assurance and quality enhancement with additional guidance on the institutional responsibilities in this regard.

The final observation relates to the visibility and branding of the agency. The panel encourages AIKA to look at a plan for establishing more brand visibility for AIKA (if it is the intension to separate AIKA from AIC) and to take a more strategic approach towards the stakeholder engagement with clearly defined target groups. The communications strategy and overall branding of the agency (website and all other tools and features) should benefit from more explicit planning with more clarity on the agency title or the organisation title whichever the case may be.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

Quality Agency for Higher Education, Academic Information Centre

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
DAY 1- Monday 19 February 2018		
	Panel meeting	Review Panel: Dr Heli Mattisen, Director, Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA), Estonia – Chair Mrs Karena Maguire, Head of Relationship Management, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Ireland – Secretary Prof Roger King, Visiting Professor, University of Bath, UK Mr Blazhe Todorovski, Master of Law at University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, Macedonia Ms Anaïs Gourdin, ENQA Review Coordinator
18:00	Panel meeting with the resource person Venue: MONIKA Centrum Hotels, Elizabetes iela 21	Mrs Jolanta Silka, Deputy Head of the Agency
	Panel meeting (closed meeting)	
	Dinner (panel only)	
DAY 2 – Tuesday 20 February 2018		
Timing	Meeting	Attendees
8:30 – 9:15 (45')	Session 1 – Director of AIC	Mrs Baiba Ramaņa , Director of AIC, Chairperson of AIC Board
9:15 – 9:30	Panel private meeting	
9:30 – 10:30 (60')	Session 2 – Head of the Agency and Deputy Head of the Agency	Prof Andrejs Rauhvargers , Head of the Agency Mrs Jolanta Silka , Deputy Head of the Agency

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
10.30-10.45	Panel private meeting	
10:45 – 11:45 (60')	Session 3 – Assessment Coordinators	Ms Ilva Grigorjeva , Expert Ms Asnate Kažoka , Expert Mrs Marina Mekša , Expert Ms Zane Ozoliņa , Expert Mrs Vineta Sondore , Expert Mr Mārtiņš Upmacis , Expert
11.45-12.00	Panel private meeting	
12:00 – 12:45 (45')	Session 4 – Other staff members <i>(translation will be required)</i>	Ms Santa Kalnmaile , Lawyer Mrs Iveta Lasmāne , Office manager Mrs Inita Zaļkalne , IT specialist Mrs Agnese Bīdermane , Project manager Mrs Elita Uzulēna , Project coordinator
12:45 – 13:30	Panel meeting during lunch (closed meeting)	
13:30 – 14:30 (60')	Session 5 – Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes and Committee for the Accreditation of Studies	Prof Tatjana Volkova , Chair of the Committee Prof Ilze Akota Asoc. prof. Elmārs Beķeris Prof Atis Kampars Mrs Solvita Siliņa , Chair of the Appeals Committee for the Latvian Academy of Sport Education
14.30-14.45	Panel private meeting	
14:45 – 15:30 (45')	Session 6 – Council of Higher Education	Prof Jānis Vētra , Chair of the Council Prof Baiba Rivža , Deputy Chair of the Council, member delegated by the Latvian Academy of Sciences Dr Aldis Baumanis , member delegated by the Association of Private Universities Prof Andris Teikmanis , member delegated by the Association of Latvian Art Higher Education Institutions Mr Arkādijs Zvaigzne , Student member of the council

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
15.30- 15.45	Panel private meeting	
15:45 – 16:45 (60')	Session 7 – External stakeholders and partner organisations (including AIKA Council)	<p>Mr Jānis Bernāts, Secretary General of the Latvian Rectors' Council</p> <p>Mr Maksims Platonovs, the Deputy Director of the Supervision Department of the State Education Quality Service</p> <p>Mrs Ruta Porniece, Head of Education and Employment Department, Employers' Confederation of Latvia (<i>replacing Mrs Līga Meņģelšone, Chair of the AIKA Council</i>)</p> <p>Dr Aigars Rostovskis, the Chair of the Council of Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, member of AIKA Council</p> <p>Ms Katrīna Sproģe, Vice-president of the Student Union of Latvia (<i>replacing Ms Maira Belova, President of the Student Union of Latvia, member of the AIKA Council</i>)</p> <p>Dr Inga Vanaga, President of Latvia Trade Union of Education and Science Employees, member of AIKA Council</p>
16:45 – 17:00	Panel private meeting	
17:00 – 17:45 (45')	Session 8 – Representatives of other ministries (<i>translation will be required</i>)	<p>Mrs Kristīne Kļaviņa, Head of the Strategic Planning Division, Ministry of Health</p> <p>Mrs Liene Liepiņa, Deputy Head of Structure and Military Personnel Development Planning Section, Defence Planning and Analysis Department, Ministry of Defence</p> <p>Mrs Dace Roga, Senior Expert Strategic Planning Division, Ministry of Health</p>
17:45 – 19:00	Additional clarifications	<p>Mrs Jolanta Silka, Deputy Head of the Agency</p> <p>Ms Asnate Kažoka, Expert</p>
	Panel meeting (closed meeting)	
19:30	Dinner (panel only)	
DAY 3 – Wednesday 21 February 2018		
Timing	Meeting	Attendees
8:15	Departure from the hotel to the Ministry of Education and Science	

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
	<i>(by minibus)</i>	
8:45 – 9:30 (45')	<p>Session 9 – Ministry of Education and Science Venue: Valņu iela 2</p> <p><i>(transport will be organised from Monika Centrum Hotel to the Ministry and from the Ministry to the AIC office)</i></p>	<p>Mrs Agrita Kiopa, Deputy State Secretary, Head of the Department of Higher Education, Research and Innovation</p> <p>Mrs Dace Jansone, Senior Expert, Department of Higher Education, Research and Innovation</p> <p>Mr Jānis Paiders, Senior Expert, Department of Higher Education, Research and Innovation</p> <p>Ms Linda Upīte, Legal Advisor, Department of Higher Education, Research and Innovation</p>
9:30 – 10:15	Transfer from Valņu iela 2 to Dzirnavu iela 16	
10:15 – 11:15 (60')	<p>Session 10 – Higher education institutions (public institutions)</p> <p><i>(probably translation will be required)</i></p>	<p>Prof Maija Burima, Acting Vice-Rector for Studies and Science, Daugavpils University (university, located in Daugavpils) <i>Accreditation of a study direction</i></p> <p>Prof. Juris Grants, Vice-Rector of Science, Latvian Academy of Sport Education (higher education institution, located in Riga) <i>Accreditation of a study direction</i></p> <p>Asoc prof Līga Peiseniece, Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, BA School of Business and Finance (higher education institution, located in Riga), member of the Council of BA Business College (college, located in Riga) <i>Accreditation of a study direction both for the BA School of Business and Finance and BA Business College, licensing of study programmes and assessment of changes for the BA School of Business and Finance</i></p> <p>Prof Uldis Sukovskis, Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, Riga Technical University (university, located in Riga) <i>Accreditation of a study direction, licensing of study programmes and assessment of changes</i></p> <p>Dr Ināra Upmale, Director, Red Cross Medical College of Riga Stradiņš University (college, located in Riga) <i>Licensing of study programmes</i></p>
11.15-11.30	Panel private meeting	

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
11:30 – 12:30 (60')	Session 11 – Higher education institutions (private institutions)	<p>Dr Anna Saltikova, the Chair of the Board of University College of Economics and Culture (higher education institution, located in Riga) and a member of the Board of Alberta College (college, located in Riga) <i>Accreditation of two study directions for the University College and licensing of study programme for the University College</i></p> <p>Prof Irina Senņikova, Rector of RISEBA University College of Business, Arts and Technology (higher education institution, located in Riga) <i>Licensing of study programmes and assessment of changes</i></p> <p>Prof Liesma Ose, Vice-Rector for Education of Transport and Telecommunication institute (higher education institution, located in Riga) <i>Licensing of study programme</i></p> <p>Mrs. Jūlija Pasnaka, the Chair of the Board of HOTEL SCHOOL RIGA college (college, located in Riga) <i>Accreditation of a study direction, currently preparing for accreditation of college</i></p>
12:30- 13:30	Panel meeting during lunch (closed meeting)	
13:30 – 14:30 (60')	Session 12 – Student experts and LSA	<p>Mr Matijs Babris, student at Riga Technical University (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the secretary of the experts group</i>), responsible for Social Affairs in LSA</p> <p>Ms Anna Bogdanova, student at Riga Graduate School of Law (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the secretary of the experts group</i>)</p> <p>Mr Rūdolfs Freibergs, student at Turība University College (<i>participated in accreditation of two study directions</i>)</p> <p>Mr Dāvis Freidenfelds, student at Riga Technical University (<i>participated in licensing of a study programme as expert</i>), member of the LSA Academic Affairs division, responsible for the nomination of student experts</p> <p>Mr Kaspars Salenieks, student at BA School of Business and Finance (<i>participated in accreditation of a college</i>)</p> <p>Mr Dāvis Vēveris, student at Latvia University of Agriculture (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction</i>), responsible for Internal Affairs in LSA</p>

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
		Ms Inguna Zariņa , student at University of Latvia (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction</i>)
14:30 – 14:45	Panel private meeting	
14:45 – 15:45 (60')	Session 13 – Experts (local) & Labour market (<i>translation will be required</i>)	<p>Prof Margarita Dunska, University of Latvia (<i>participated in licensing of a study programme</i>)</p> <p>Mr Kalvis Innuss, Maritime Administration of Latvia (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the secretary of the experts group</i>), representing the labour market</p> <p>Mrs Anita Līce, Employers' Confederation of Latvia (<i>participated in accreditation of a college</i>), representing the labour market</p> <p>Prof Boriss Mišņevs, Transport and Telecommunication institute (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction</i>)</p> <p>Dr Anda Prikšāne, University of Latvia (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the secretary of the experts group</i>)</p> <p>Dr Daina Vasiļevska, Riga Technical University (<i>participated in licensing of a study programme</i>)</p> <p>Dr Māra Kuļša, Riga Stradiņš University (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction</i>)</p>
15:45 – 16:00	Panel private meeting	
16:00 – 16:45 (45')	Session 14 – Experts (international) (<i>skype</i>)	<p>Prof Rimvydas Labanauskis, assistant professor at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the chair of the experts group</i>)</p> <p>Prof Frank McMahan, Former Director of Academic Affairs for Dublin Institute of Technology and former chair of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network, Ireland (<i>participated in accreditation of two study directions as the chair of the experts group</i>)</p> <p>Prof Sokratis Katsikas, professor and former rector of University of Piraeus and professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the chair of the experts group</i>)</p>

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
		<p>Mr Lewis Purser, director of Academic Affairs at the Irish Universities Association (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the secretary of the experts group</i>)</p> <p>Prof Rein Raud, former rector of Tallinn University (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the chair of the experts group</i>)</p> <p>Dr Lil Reif, Expert for European and International Programmes, Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction as the secretary of the experts group</i>)</p>
16.45 – 17.00	Panel private meeting	
17:00 – 17.45 (45)	Session 15 – Observers	<p>Dr Līga Paula, lecturer at Latvian University of Agriculture, observer nominated by the Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees (<i>participated in accreditation of study directions and licensing of study programmes</i>)</p> <p>Ms Santa Zarāne, student at University of Latvia, observer nominated by the Student Union of Latvia (<i>participated in accreditation of a study direction</i>)</p> <p>Ms Anna Paula Gruzdiņa, student at Ventspils University College (<i>participated in licensing of a study programme</i>)</p> <p>Ms Ilva Ogle, student at Riga Stradiņš University (<i>participated in licensing of a study programme</i>)</p>
17:45 – 18:00	Additional clarifications	
	Panel meeting (closed meeting)	
20:00	Dinner (panel only)	
DAY 4 – Thursday 22 February 2018		
Timing	Meeting	Attendees
8:30 – 10:00	Panel meeting (closed meeting)	
10:00 – 11:00 (60')	Session 16 – Head of the Agency, Deputy Head of the Agency	<p>Prof Andrejs Rauhvargers, Head of the Agency</p> <p>Mrs Jolanta Silka, Deputy Head of the Agency</p> <p>Ms Asnate Kažoka, Expert</p>
11:00 – 12:00	Panel meeting (closed meeting)	
12:00 – 13:00	Panel meeting during lunch (closed meeting)	
13:00 – 14:00	Final de-briefing meeting with AIC about the panel's preliminary findings	<p>Mrs Baiba Ramiņa, Director of AIC, Chairperson of AIC Board</p> <p>Prof Andrejs Rauhvargers, Head of the Agency</p>

Timing	Meeting	Attendees
		Mrs Jolanta Silka , Deputy Head of the Agency Ms Asnate Kažoka , Expert

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

External review of the Academic Information Centre (AIC) by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

30 August 2017

1. Background and Context

History of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Latvia

Latvia is one of the earliest European Higher Education Area (hereinafter – EHEA) countries that have developed a quality assurance system and established a quality assurance agency. The first Latvian quality assurance agency (hereinafter - AIKNC) was established in 1994 and it ensured the accreditation of study programmes and institutions. However, in 2012, as an element of reforms in higher education, the Ministry of Education and Science decided to transfer accreditation activities from the AIKNC to the Ministry of Education and Science.

Establishing the current quality assurance agency

On 3 November 2014, the Latvian government decided to set up a new, independent QA Agency for higher education. This new agency should operate according to the European Standards and Guidelines (hereinafter – ESG) and become a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (hereinafter –ENQA) and be included in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (hereinafter – EQAR).

The Government also decided to assign the task to establish the new agency Academic Information Centre (hereinafter - AIC). The AIC is an independent, non-profit foundation, to undertake the task to establish the new quality assurance agency as an autonomous department of the AIC. All units of the AIC are involved in higher education, i.e., the Latvian Agency for Quality Assurance (AIKA), the Latvian ENIC/NARIC Centre for academic recognition of qualifications and information point for recognition in regulated professions, and projects such as the Coordination Point for Latvian National Qualifications Framework, participation in information network ReferNet, established by Cedefop, Latvian National Europass Centre, as well as the information point for foreign students “Study in Latvia”.

The AIKA was established in March 2015 and started to work at a full capacity on 1 July 2015. The AIKA is a new agency, but it grew rapidly due to several important growth factors. The establishment of the Agency took place at the same time as the finalisation of the ESG-2015, and the Agency could implement the new ESG version straight ahead; the AIKA also was based on the experience and knowledge it took over from the expert pool and the database of the former agency AIKNC.

The AIKA is autonomous and recognized as the national quality assurance agency for higher education, set up to improve the external quality assurance system for Latvian higher education, which would operate in accordance with the ESG and promote the quality, visibility and international recognition of Latvian higher education, covering the entire Latvian higher education system: both state and private HEIs and from short-cycle programmes to doctoral ones.

Support for establishing agency

Before the AIKA started working, the Law on Institutions of Higher Education was amended and new Government Regulations were adopted on 14 July 2015, which introduced the ESG-15 principles into the national legislation. Minor additional amendments were implemented in 2017. In addition, the Latvian government has approved and submitted to the Parliament for ratification an amendment to the Law of HEIs to allow the agencies registered with the EQAR to operate in Latvia as of 1 January 2018.

To support the AIC to train its staff, experts, HEIs and stakeholders, develop methodology and strengthen the equipment of the Agency, the Latvian government also provided both Latvian state funds and European Social Funds project “The Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency”.

Internationalisation of the Agency

The Agency is an affiliate of ENQA since April 2015, a full member of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (CEENQA) since 2015, a full member of the Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) since 2016, and of the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) since 2017.

The AIKA is ensuring internationalisation in several ways: participating in the exchanges of experts, joint assessment, the exchange of experience, and information and training.

AIC has been an affiliate of ENQA since April 2015 and is applying for ENQA membership.

AIC is applying for registration on EQAR.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

This review, will evaluate the way in which and to what extent AIC fulfils the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Consequently, the review will provide information to the ENQA Board to aid its consideration of whether membership of AIC should be granted and to support AIC application to register in EQAR.

The review panel is not expected, however, to make any judgements as regards granting membership.

2.1 Activities of AIC within the scope of the ESG

In order for the agency to apply for ENQA membership and for potential registration in EQAR, this review will analyse all activities of AIC that are within the scope of the ESG, i.e. reviews, audits, evaluations or accreditation of higher education institutions or programmes that relate to teaching and learning (and their relevant links to research and innovation). This is regardless of whether these activities are carried out within or outside the EHEA, and whether they are obligatory or voluntary.

The following activities of the AIC have to be addressed in the external review:

- **Initial accreditation of new programmes** (local title “Licensing”) is an ex-ante evaluation and an initial assessment. Licensing is an EQA activity carried out to determine the potential quality of a new study programme in order to give a permission to start programme implementation and enrol students.

- **Accreditation of groups of study programmes** (local title “Accreditation of study directions”). This is an EQA activity for evaluating and assessing groups of programmes. Accreditation procedures lead to a formal decision. The conclusion is based on the set of pre-defined criteria.
- **Institutional evaluation.** This EQA activity includes examining the quality of all activities within a higher education institution that include the management of the organisation, financial matters, facilities, teaching and research, etc.
- **Assessment of feasibility on changes in study programmes** (i.e. study directions). Non-cyclical activity that is done based on the request of HEIs if changes were made in their study programme between two cyclical assessments of study direction falling under one of five cases mentioned in Cabinet Regulations (for example, changes in the title of the study programme, language of instruction, enrolment requirements, degree and qualification awarded and other).

3. The Review Process

The process is designed in the light of the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in line with the requirements of the *EQAR Procedures for Applications*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Formulation of the Terms of Reference and protocol for the review;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel;
- Self-assessment by AIC including the preparation of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to AIC ;
- Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final evaluation report by the ENQA Review Committee;
- Analysis of the scrutiny by the ENQA Board and their decision regarding ENQA membership;
- Follow-up of the panel’s and/or ENQA Board’s recommendations by the agency, including a voluntary follow-up visit.

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

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

In addition to the four members, the panel will be supported by the ENQA Secretariat review coordinator who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA expectations are met throughout the process. The ENQA staff member will not be the Secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

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

ENQA will provide AIC with the list of suggested experts with their respective curriculum vitae to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The experts will have to sign a non-conflict of interest statement as regards AIC review.

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

AIC is responsible for the execution and organisation of its own self-assessment process and shall take into account the following guidance:

- **Self-assessment is organised as a project with a clearly defined schedule and includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;**
- The self-assessment report is broken down by the topics of the evaluation and is expected to contain, among others: a brief description of the national HE and QA system; background description of the current situation of the Agency; an analysis and appraisal of the current situation; proposals for improvement and measures already planned; a SWOT analysis; each criterion (ESG part II and III) addressed individually. All agency's QA activities (whether within their national jurisdiction or outside of it, and whether obligatory or voluntary) will be described and their compliance with the ESG analysed.
- The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which AIC fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and meets the ESG and thus the requirements of ENQA membership.
- The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat who has 4 weeks to pre-scrutinise it before forwarding the report to the panel of experts. The purpose of the pre-scrutiny is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but whether the necessary information, as stated in the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews, is present. For the second and subsequent reviews, the agency is expected to enlist the recommendations provided in the previous review and to outline actions taken to meet these recommendations. In case the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to reject the report and ask for a revised version within 4 weeks. In such cases, an additional fee of 1000 € will be charged to the agency.
- The report is submitted to the review panel a minimum of six weeks prior to the site visit.

3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

AIC will draw up a draft proposal of the schedule for the site visit to be submitted to the review panel at least two months before the planned dates of the visit. The schedule includes an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit, the duration of which is 2,5 days. The approved schedule shall be given to AIC at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The review panel will be assisted by AIC in arriving in Riga, Latvia.

The site visit will close with an oral presentation and discussion of the major issues of the evaluation between the review panel and AIC.

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for

consistency, clarity and language and it will be then submitted to AIC within 11 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If AIC chooses to provide a statement in reference to the draft report it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter the review panel will take into account the statement by AIC, finalise the document and submit it to AIC and ENQA.

The report is to be finalised within three months of the site visit and will not exceed 40 pages in length.

When preparing the report, the review panel should also bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG*, so as to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR.

AIC is also requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation applying for membership and the ways in which AIC expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be discussed along with the final evaluation report.

4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

AIC will consider the expert panel's report and will publish it on its website once the ENQA Board has made its decision. The report will also be published on the ENQA website, regardless of the review outcome and decision by the ENQA Board. AIC commits to preparing a follow-up plan in which it addresses the recommendations of the review panel and to submitting a follow-up report to the ENQA Board. The follow-up report will be published on the ENQA website, in addition to the full review report and the Board's decision.

The follow-up report will be complemented by a small-scale visit to the agency performed by two members of the original panel (whenever possible). This visit will be used to discuss issues, based on the ESG, considered as of particular importance or challenge by AIC. Its purpose is entirely developmental and has no impact on the judgement of membership and/or compliance of the agency with the ESG.

5. Use of the report

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

The review report is used by the Board of ENQA for the purpose of reaching a conclusion on whether AIC has met the ESG and can be thus admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA. The report will also be used for registration on EQAR, and is designed so as to serve these two purposes. However, the review report is to be considered final only after being approved by the ENQA Board. Once submitted to AIC and ENQA and until it is approved by the Board the report may not be used or relied upon by AIC, the panel and any third party and may not be disclosed without the prior written consent of ENQA. AIC may use the report at its discretion only after the Board has approved of the report. The approval of the report is independent of the decision on membership.

The Chair of the panel shall remain available to respond to questions of clarification or further information from the EQAR Register Committee provided that the ENQA Secretariat is copied in all such requests.

6. Budget

AIC shall pay the following review related fees:

Fee of the Chair	4,500 EUR
Fee of the Secretary	4,500 EUR

Fee of the 2 other panel members	4,000 EUR (2,000 EUR each)
Fee of 2 panel members for follow-up visit	1,000 EUR (500 EUR each)
Administrative overhead for ENQA Secretariat	7,000 EUR
Experts Training	1,400 EUR
Approximate travel and subsistence expenses	6,000 EUR
Travel and subsistence expenses follow-up visit	1,600 EUR

This gives a total indicative cost of 30,000.00 EUR VAT excl. for a review team of 4 members. In the case that the allowance for travel and subsistence expenses is exceeded, AIC will cover any additional costs after the completion of the review. However, the ENQA Secretariat will endeavour to keep the travel and subsistence expenses in the limits of the planned budget, and will refund the difference to AIC if the travel and subsistence expenses go under budget.

In the event of a second site visit required by the Board and aiming at completing the assessment of compliance, and should the agency accept a second visit, an additional fee of 500 EUR per expert, as well as travel and subsistence costs are recoverable from the agency.

7. Indicative Schedule of the Review

Appointment of review panel members	October/November 2017
Self-assessment completed	End of November 2017
Pre-screening of SER by ENQA coordinator	December 2017
Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable	January 2018
Briefing of review panel members	January 2018
Review panel site visit	February 2018
Draft of evaluation report and submitting it to ENQA coordinator for pre-screening	By April 2018
Draft of evaluation report to AIC	Mid-April 2018
Statement of AIC to review panel if necessary	Early May 2018
Submission of final report to ENQA	By Mid-May 2018
Consideration of the report by ENQA Board and response of AIC	June 2018
Publication of the report	June/July 2018

ANNEX 3 - GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY

AIC – Academic Information Centre

AIKA – Quality Agency for Higher Education - Department of AIC

CAS - Committee for the Accreditation of Studies

CEENQA - Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in HE

CHE – Council of Higher Education

CLSP - Committee for Licensing of Study Programmes

ECTS – European Credit Transfer System

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

EQF – European Qualifications Framework

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

HEQEC - Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre

INQAAHE - The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

IQA – Internal quality assurance

LDDK - Employers' Confederation of Latvia

LIZDA - Latvian Trade Union of Education and Science Employees

LSA - Student Union of Latvia

NQF- National Qualifications Framework

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

RSD – Register of Study Directions

SAR – Self-evaluation Report/Self-assessment report

TQM – Total Quality Management

UNESCO - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

Additional information provided by AIC -regulations and internal documents

- AIC Code of Ethics
- AIKA Staff Profiles
- AIC Statutes (2009)
- Amendments to the AIC Statutes (2015)
- AIKA Annual Plan for 2017
- AIKA Annual Plan for 2018
- Plan for Thematic Analysis
- Assessment Methodologies (with dates of approval)
- AIKA Rules of Procedure
- Statement on confidentiality for observers
- Internal regulations for staff (Regulations for handling information for service purposes, Internal Rules of Procedure (office hours, annual leaves and holidays, recruitment procedures, responsibilities, salaries, additional bonuses, health insurance), labour protection, civil protection)
- Budget of AIKA (state budget, ESF project budget overview, overview of AIKA income in 2017 (AIKA's part from HEI fees according to the price-list))

DESCRIPTIONS/EVIDENCE

- Connection and interaction between the AIKA Council and AIC governing authorities
- Establishment and composition of Committee for Accreditation of Studies (CAS) and Committee for Licensing of Study programmes (CLSP)
- Composition of the Council of Higher Education (CHE)
- Information on how CAS and CLSP decisions are taken
- Information about the State Education Quality Service
- Appeals procedure and nomination and composition of the Appeals Committee
- Observers in quality assessment procedures and list of observers who have participated in assessment procedures in 2015 – 2017
- Organisational structure of AIC, distribution of responsibilities within AIC, distribution of responsibilities between the AIC director and AIKA director
- Evidence for thematic analysis
- Human resources policy
- Agenda for the competence development seminar for AIKA staff

INFORMATION ABOUT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

- Materials for the institutional assessment procedure of Latvian Business College (self-assessment report, compliance assessment by AIC, report of the experts group, decision by CHE)
- Materials for the licensing procedure of academic master study programme "Financial engineering mathematics", Riga Technical University (application, self-

assessment report, review by the agency, experts joint report, summary for CLSP, decision)

- Materials for the accreditation procedure of study direction "Health Care", Latvian Academy of Sport Education (compliance assessment, CAS meeting minutes, decision of CAS, decision of AIC)
- Examples of different decisions by CAS and CLSP (decision on the study direction "Language and Culture Studies, Native Language Studies and Language Programmes" by Daugavpils University, decision on study direction "Architecture and Construction" by Riga Technical University, decision on study programme "Therapeutic Massage" by International College of Cosmetology, decision on study direction "Hotel and Restaurant Services, Tourism and Recreation Organisation" by the Hospitality Business College "Hotel School", decision on study programme "Programming Specialist" by Ventspils University College, decision on changes in study direction "Management, Administration and Real Estate Management" by University College of Economics and Culture)
- Self-assessment report for licensing, according to the revised guidelines, study programme "Law Science", University College Turība, study programme "Virtual Reality and Mobile Technologies", Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences
- Experts report about licensing, according to the revised guidelines, study programme "Design and Graphics of Computer Games", University College of Economics and Culture

NATIONAL DOCUMENTS

- Amendments to the Law on Institutions of Higher Education

OTHER SOURCES

- The World Bank report "Higher Education Financing in Latvia: Final Report"
- The website of the Ministry for Education in Latvia
- The website of the Agency – AIC/AIKA



THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency Review of the Academic Information Centre (AIC), undertaken in 2018.



2018 ENQA AGENCY REVIEW