

ENQA AGENCY REVIEW

ACADEMIC INFORMATION CENTRE (AIC)

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| CONTENTS | 1 |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY..... | 3 |
| INTRODUCTION..... | 5 |
| BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS | 5 |
| BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW | 5 |
| SCOPE OF THE REVIEW | 5 |
| MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2023 REVIEW | 6 |
| REVIEW PROCESS..... | 6 |
| HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN LATVIA..... | 7 |
| HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM..... | 7 |
| QUALITY ASSURANCE..... | 8 |
| AIC | 9 |
| AIC'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE..... | 9 |
| AIC'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES | 9 |
| AIC'S FUNDING | 9 |
| FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF AIC WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) | 10 |
| ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES | 10 |
| ESG 3.6 INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT | 10 |
| ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE | 12 |
| ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE..... | 12 |
| ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS | 14 |
| ESG 2.6 REPORTING | 15 |
| ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS..... | 18 |
| MOVING TOWARDS A NEW SYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES | 18 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 19 |
| OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS | 19 |
| SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT | 19 |
| ANNEXES..... | 20 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| ANNEX 1: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT | 20 |
| ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW | 22 |
| ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY | 27 |
| ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW | 28 |
| DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY AIC..... | 28 |
| OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL | 28 |



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses the compliance of the Quality Agency for Higher Education (abb. AIKA in Latvian) a separate entity of the Latvian Academic Information Centre (short AIC) – further in the report referred to as AIC - with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), following the agreed Terms of Reference.

This review was conducted according to the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews*, during a rather brief period of time (between June 2024 and January 2025). It follows a full review that was organised in 2023 after which the EQAR Register Committee concluded on AIC's partial compliance with the ESG standards 2.1, 2.4, 2.6 and 3.6. In its 12.12.2023 decision, the EQAR RC therefore stated that AIC was not complying substantially with the ESG as a whole. Consequently, the EQAR RC required a partial review of the following standards:

- ESG 2.1 (Consideration of internal quality assurance) – The EQAR RC concluded that even when considering that different procedures could be regarded as a package, there are missing elements with regards to standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.8 in the QA model of the agency.
- ESG 2.4 (Peer review experts) – The EQAR RC noted that students were at the time not included in one procedure “inclusion of licenced study programme on the accreditation of study field”, which was designed as a temporary solution that will cease to exist in 2025 (as stated in AIC's 2023 SAR and additional representation to EQAR as well as noted in the EQAR RC decision).
- ESG 2.6 (Reporting) – The EQAR RC noted that full decisions are not published together with the reports in all cases/procedures.
- ESG 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct) – The EQAR RC noted AIC's internal quality assurance system faces a number of issues and limitations. In essence, no major changes/ improvements can take place without government regulation or legal change. The EQAR RC also found that the informal nature of the feedback would limit the ability of the agency to measure objectively “the outputs of the system”; and was missing sufficient evidence that experts are getting acquainted with additional requirements or obligations set by Study Quality Commission after the accreditation procedure.

The purpose of this partial review is then to verify how the shortcomings identified by the EQAR RC following the 2023 full review have been addressed by AIC. Furthermore, as the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* aim at constant enhancement of the agencies, the panel has adopted a developmental approach.

At the time of the 2023 full review, AIC was organising six different external QA procedures:

- Accreditation of HEI (mandatory procedure only for newly established HEI – at the moment, all HEIs in Latvia are accredited for indefinite period)
- Accreditation and assessment of study field (mandatory procedure)
- Licensing of study programmes (mandatory procedure)
- Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (which was recognised to be outside the scope of the ESG by the EQAR RC in its decision from 12.12.2023)
- Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field (applicable only if the programme could not be assessed together with the whole study field due to timing issues)
- Accreditation of study programmes abroad (which has been temporarily discontinued due to the heavy workload at the Agency in years 2022 – 2024).

Following the 2023 full review and considering the needs of the HE sector, the AIC – together with the public authorities – decided to remove the procedure called “Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field” from the agency’s portfolio of activities.

In addition, as many other countries, Latvia appears to be moving more towards cyclical institutional reviews. At the time of the visit, the agency was in the final phase of developing a model for external quality assurance that would include cyclical institutional assessment and accreditation and certain elements of study programme licensing. Most notably, the new system for external quality assurance confirms the removal of previous procedures such as “Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field” (starting from September 2024) and “Assessment/accreditation of study fields” as well as significantly revises or even partially abandons the procedures “Licensing of study programme” and “Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes)”.

Taking this context into consideration and in light of the available documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel made the following judgements and recommendation on the compliance of AIC with the four ESGs subject to this partial review.

Regarding ESG 3.6, the panel found robust and well documented procedures and noted that AIC’s stakeholders trust in the agency’s feedback cycles and are well aware of the feedback channels. However, the review panel recommends AIC to include procedures and aspects focusing on effectiveness and impact into their quality manual and array of internal quality procedures and thereby making use of data sources beyond feedback surveys.

In view of the changes made to the reference frameworks used by the agency and the changes to the QA procedures implemented by AIC, the panel was able to verify that the agency complies with ESG 2.1.

Regarding ESG 2.4, the review panel was able to conclude that, considering the changes to the QA procedures implemented by AIC, students are now included in all the QA procedures implemented by the agency.

Finally, with regard to ESG 2.6, the review panel was able to observe that there have been changes in the national legislation and with newly approved amendments, full texts of all decisions taken by the Study Quality Commission are now published on the AIC E-platform.

The review panel thus concluded on the AIC’s compliance with ESG 3.6, 2.1, 2.4, 2.6.

The panel didn’t note any changes affecting compliance with other standards.

Based on the analysis provided, the review panel considers that, in the performance of its functions, AIC is in compliance with the ESG.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Quality Agency for Higher Education (abb. AIKA in Latvian) a separate entity of the Latvian Academic Information Centre (short AIC) with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). However, as the legal entity applying for EQAR membership is the Academic Information Centre (AIC), this report will further use “AIC” or “the agency” when referring to the assessed entity.

It is based on an external partial review (meaning that only selected ESG were assessed in depth following ENQA’s and EQAR’s related review methodology for partial reviews) conducted in 7 months (June 2024-January 2025).

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

AIC is undergoing this partial review in response to a decision of the EQAR Register Committee (EQAR RC) from 12.12.2023., which concluded on AIC’s partial compliance with the ESG standards 2.1, 2.4, 2.6 and 3.6 and therefore was unable to find that at this point AIC was complying substantially with the ESG as a whole. Consequently, the EQAR RC required a partial review of the following standards:

- ESG 2.1 (Consideration of internal quality assurance) – the EQAR RC concluded that even when considering that different procedures could be regarded as a package, there are missing elements with regards to standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.8 in the QA model of the agency.
- ESG 2.4 (Peer review experts) – The EQAR RC noted that students were at the time not included in one procedure [inclusion of licenced study programme on the accreditation of study field], which had not been implemented at this point.
- ESG 2.6 (Reporting) – The EQAR RC noted that full decisions are not published together with the reports in all cases/procedures.
- ESG 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct) – The EQAR RC noted AIC’s internal quality assurance system faces a number of issues and limitations. In essence, no major changes/ improvements can take place without government regulation or legal change. The EQAR RC also found that the informal nature of the feedback would limit the ability of the agency to objectively measure “the outputs of the system”; and was missing sufficient evidence that experts are getting acquainted with additional requirements or obligations set by Study Quality Commission after the accreditation procedure.

The panel didn’t note any changes affecting compliance with other standards, thus the review focused on selected standards only, but at the same time took into consideration any key developments within the agency and its relevant environment.

The panel has adopted a developmental approach, as the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* aim at constant enhancement of the agencies.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

As stipulated above and in accordance with the Terms of reference (TOR) between AIC, ENQA and EQAR, the partial review of AIC zooms in at a selected number of standards - yet across the relevant portfolio of activities. After abandoning the procedure called “inclusion of licenced study programme on the accreditation of study field” (further elaborated under the section Higher education and quality assurance system in Latvia), the agency’s portfolio currently consists of four activities that fall within the scope of the ESG/this review:

- accreditation of HEI
- accreditation and assessment of study field
- licensing of study programme
- accreditation of study programmes abroad

This portfolio is expected to undergo some changes in the near future, which are further explained in the sections on the agency and the Latvian quality assurance system.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2023 REVIEW

In 2023, the review panel reached the following judgments:

| ESG | Compliance level |
|---|-------------------------|
| 3.1 Activities, policy, and process for quality assurance | Compliant |
| 3.2 Official status | Compliant |
| 3.3 Independence | Compliant |
| 3.4 Thematic Analysis | Compliant |
| 3.5 Resources | Compliant |
| 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct | Compliant |
| 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies | Compliant |
| 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance | Partially compliant |
| 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose | Compliant |
| 2.3 Implementing processes | Compliant |
| 2.4 Peer-review experts | Partially compliant |
| 2.5 Criteria for outcomes | Compliant |
| 2.6 Reporting | Partially compliant |
| 2.7 Complaints and appeals | Partially compliant |

Based on the ERR, the EQAR RC concluded on AIC's partial compliance with the ESG standards 2.1, 2.4, 2.6 and 3.6 and therefore was unable to find that at this point AIC was complying substantially with the ESG as a whole. Consequently, the EQAR RC required this partial review to be organised.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2024 partial external review of AIC was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews* and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of

Reference. The panel for the external review of AIC was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Oliver Vettori, Dean Accreditation and Quality Management, HE Researcher, Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria, Chair, academic (EUA nominee)
- Eva Jaroszewski, Director, Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Belgium, panel member, QA professional (ENQA nominee)
- Arnoldas Solovjovas, PhD student in laser technologies and material science, Vilnius University, Lithuania, panel member, student (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool).

Goran Dakovic, ENQA's Head of Reviews, acted as the review coordinator.

Self-assessment report

The self-assessment report for the partial review of AIC was completed in September 2024 by AIC - and received by the panel on 10 October 2024. In accordance with the Terms of Reference, the SAR had been prepared for the partial review of AIC against the ESG standards 2.1, 2.4, 2.6 and 3.6 only. The agency in addition reported that there had not been any changes affecting compliance with other standards since the full review in 2023. Major other developments since the full review were briefly described in the SAR as well even if not part of the Terms of Reference - and to some degree have been scrutinised during the visit following the developmental approach to it.

The self-assessment report was perceived as informative and evaluative, with the agency making a clear case, ensuring an effective preparatory phase for the panel. Whenever the panel needed some additional contextual information, the SAR from the full review in 2023, which is available on ENQA's website as well as ENQA review report from 2023 were consulted.

Site visit

The site visit was organised on site in Riga, Latvia, and took place from 4th to 5th of December 2024, with a second preparatory meeting (the first one had been held online) for the peer review team on 3rd of December. This being a partial review, the panel and the agency had agreed early to also focus on the specific groups of stakeholders and actors, including the agency's management and staff, higher education institution representatives, reviewers and a representative from the Ministry. AIC has done an excellent job in preparing the visit, and the panel was impressed by the openness and deep level of reflected experience shown by all interviewees. For two interviews - higher education institution representatives and reviewers - some interviewees participated online. When additional information was requested, the agency reacted swiftly and effectively, making sure that the panel did not lack any information needed in order to fully assess the standards in question.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN LATVIA

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The higher education system of Latvia, which is legally regulated via four different relevant legal acts and about half a dozen government ("cabinet") regulations, covers the European/Latvian Qualification Framework levels 5-8, including short-cycle professional education (LQF5/EQF5), academic bachelor's

studies or professional bachelor's studies (first cycle; LQF6/EQF6), academic master's studies or professional master's studies or professional higher education, such as medical studies (second cycle; LQF7/EQF7) and doctoral studies or professional higher education (residency in medicine) (third cycle; LQF8/EQF8). The Qualification Framework also is a key orientation mark for the initial development and potential changes of any study programme and is embedded in the quality assurance schemes of AIC.

According to the SAR, at the point of the review, higher education is offered by 48 higher education institutions, including two branches of foreign higher education institutions (data per September 2024). The sector is currently undergoing considerable transformation, with one specialised HEI having been merged with a larger entity, and two other universities having been reorganised and restarted under a new name. Changes are also afoot for the college sector.

The overall student population in 2023 was 74 017 with 57 865 students studying in state and 16 152 students in private higher education institutions. The total number of mobile (international) students in 2023 was 10 425, meaning a 14% share (data per February 2024). From 2025 onwards, student workload will be defined in ECTS credit points only, across all study programmes.

With regard to the review, it is notable that AIC is actively involved in policy making on the national level, far beyond its quality assurance remit, mirroring the different “structural units” of the agency.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

With regard to the fact that this is a partial review report and the last full review was conducted just a year prior, only updates since the 2023 review regarding quality assurance on the national level are provided in this report.

First of all, following the 2023 full review and considering the needs of the HE sector, the AIC – together with the public authorities – decided to remove the procedure called “Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field” from the agency’s portfolio of activities. This decision was translated into amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 793 “Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields” (subpoints 1.1., 1.2 and 1.5), in force as of 1st September 2024.

Most importantly, as many other countries in the EHEA, Latvia appears to be moving more towards institutional reviews. At the time of the visit, the agency was in the process of developing a model for external quality assurance that abandons the vast array of programme level assessments from previous periods and moves towards cyclical institutional review and accreditation (while keeping certain elements of “study programme licensing” - see below). This major evolution is led by the agency, in collaboration with the Ministry and close dialogue with external stakeholders.

The new system for external quality assurance is planned to abandon the current procedure “Assessment/accreditation of study fields” as well as significantly revise or even partially abandon the procedure “Licensing of study programme”.

The new model will undergo a pilot phase that should be gradually implemented starting from 2025 with 3 pilot HEIs, with methodological details still in need to be finalised. The stated aim of this reform is to give greater autonomy to Latvian HEIs and to reduce the current burdensome and multiplying QA procedures. It results from a dialogue between the Ministry, the AIC and external stakeholders. In principle, the new model should be translated into a new legal framework and officially implemented for the entire HE sector in 2028.

Procedures that have not yet been implemented and procedures that do not fall into the scope of the ESG have not been included in this partial review.

AIC

A full description of the agency's history, organisation and structural parameters can be found in the panel report from 2023.

Since the full review in 2023, AIC has finalised and published its new strategy for the period 2024-2028, which was approved by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council and defines five strategic directions:

PUBLIC AWARENESS – , i.e. to promote the visibility of the Agency in Latvia by informing the public about its achievements and current events related to quality assurance.

ENSURING QUALITY – to promote continuous improvement of the quality of higher education and development by implementing quality assurance procedures and organizing informative events for representatives in the field of higher education.

POLICY MAKING – to be more actively involved in the national higher education/quality assurance policy-making processes, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science and other involved parties.

PERFORMANCE OF THE AGENCY – to ensure the performance of the Agency on a level appropriate to the implementation of its mission, by increasing the efficiency of internal processes.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION – to develop international cooperation that would promote the quality of Latvian higher education, the recognition of the Agency and the exchange of experience in the European higher education area.

At the time of the review visit, not all strategic goals had been fully operationalised beyond the most immediate future,

AIC'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

The panel noted no changes in the Agency's organisation or structure. Readers are referred to the 2023 full review report for further information on these aspects.

AIC'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

The panel noted no changes in the Agency's functions, activities and procedures, other than what is already described in the above section (see section Quality assurance). Readers are referred to the 2023 full review report for further information on these aspects.

AIC'S FUNDING

The panel noted no changes in the Agency's funding. Readers are referred to the 2023 full review report for further information on these aspects.

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

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

ESG 3.6 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.

In the 2023 review, the panel did not formulate any explicit recommendation, but made a suggestion in the text, encouraging the agency to complement stakeholders feedback by measuring the outputs of the system, as well as the overall impact on the quality of higher education.

In its decision from December 2023, the Register Committee, found that AIC's internal quality assurance system was facing a number of issues and limitations. In the RC's view no major changes/improvements could take place without calling upon the government or introduce legal changes; and that therefore the informal nature of the feedback could affect the ability of the agency to measure objectively "the outputs of the system"; the RC also saw no sufficient evidence that experts are getting acquainted with additional requirements or obligations set by the Study Quality Commission after the accreditation procedure. The Register Committee therefore found that AIC had yet to consolidate its internal quality assurance system, including internal and external feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement.

Evidence

AIC's internal quality management is based on a Quality Management Manual that was also reviewed in the 2023 full review. In the agency's own words, as formulated in the SAR for the 2023 review, the manual documents the activities of the Agency in the field of the quality management in order to ensure that all the staff of the Agency and involved stakeholders have common understanding, and the society is informed about quality standards of the Agency. Consequently, different stakeholders were involved in producing the manual. The manual is oriented towards the logic of a PDCA cycle.

AIC systematically seeks feedback from higher education institutions (and other stakeholders) and has provided samples of the feedback forms/invitations in the SAR. The feedback is analysed, and the agency has published a report on the external analysis of findings which is supposed to feed into development processes. No written information was provided on the quality/quantity of feedback obtained through these feedback mechanisms nor on the follow up activities, including the agency's ability to autonomously act upon the feedback.

During the interviews, it became clear that higher education institutions and reviewers alike trust in the agency's feedback cycles and are well aware of the feedback channels. Interviewees could cite examples where they felt that AIC had acted based upon their feedback and they are transparently informed about all aspects of the review, including those the Register Committee had doubts about. During the interviews with the Ministry representative as well as AIC's Chair of the Board, it became evident that AIC can autonomously act upon any kind of feedback, unless it touches upon matters regulated by law. The panel also saw a trustful and constructive relationship between AIC and the Ministry, though, resulting in legal changes if needed, as seen in the case of ESG 2.6 described below.

The SWOT analysis in the SAR lists as a strength that the agency has a *functioning internal quality assurance system that includes detailed descriptions of processes (also methodologies and guidelines) and actions to be taken, including manuals, templates*. The same SWOT also lists as weaknesses the *lack of a unified platform/solution to manage Agency's internal processes* and that *the Agency's e-platform currently does not support the implementation of all assessment procedures that could optimise the related and support processes*.

Analysis

In terms of AIC's internal quality assurance system, the review panel found good and robust procedures, which are well documented in a manual, which staff regularly consults. Processes and actions are described in impressive detail, and the information in the manual appears to be highly relevant for daily work. AIC's work is also helped by an effective communication architecture with a good mixture of formal and informal elements, giving management and staff plenty of opportunity to discuss things thoroughly.

Feedback mechanisms are well developed, and all stakeholders which the panel interviewed, appear to be well aware of them. The review panel found a sound internal quality culture taking stakeholder feedback very seriously; and an agency well capable and mandated with making the necessary changes on its own, which is helped by an excellent and constructive relationship with the Ministry. There are indeed, as in any other system, certain aspects that require a change in the law (such as the publishing of official decisions as described under standard 2.6) if the need to touch them arises - but in terms of ensuring the quality of the agency's work and implementing the necessary improvements on their own, the review panel has no doubt about AIC's autonomy and capacity to do so.

The review panel did find AIC's understanding of IQA a bit narrow, though, focusing basically on operational quality (and thereby also framing its procedural handbook an IQA manual), and not fully exploring all potential sources that would allow AIC to reflect on the impact of the agency's efforts on the quality of institutions and programmes. Strong reliance on feedback surveys as the main external impulse for improvements had also been noted by the previous panel. The agency is pervaded by a highly reflective spirit, but opportunities to take one or two steps back and systematically review if and how AIC is meeting its larger objectives, are scarce. The review load during the last couple of years likely did not help in this regard.

On the other hand, AIC has a strong tradition of analysing its procedures and operations and publish selected findings in the sense of thematic reports as required by ESG 3.4. The panel regards the available data (and how the data is currently analysed) as a potential, if currently underused starting point for evolving AIC's internal quality work.

The review panel recommends AIC to include procedures and aspects focusing on effectiveness and impact into their quality manual and array of internal quality procedures and thereby making use of data sources beyond feedback surveys.

The review panel suggests that AIC links its efforts on thematic analyses more closely and visibly to their IQA work, thus creating synergies and mutual benefits.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard:

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

2023 review recommendation

- The panel urges the agency to define an assessment framework in order to ensure that the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields considers all relevant standards of ESG Part I in order to guarantee that the study field stays ESG-compliant upon implementation of the proposed changes.
- The panel recommends to mention the requirement of a public quality assurance policy (ESG I.1) explicitly in the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field and the Accreditation of foreign study programmes frameworks, the national qualification framework (ESG I.2) in each assessment framework, focus more on assessment policies in all assessment frameworks, including a focus on student-centred assessment (ESG I.3), and to add reference to public information (ESG I.8) in the Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field framework.

In its 2023 decision, the EQAR Register Committee concluded that even when considering that different procedures could be considered as a package, there are missing elements with regards to standards I.1, I.2, I.3 and I.8 in the QA model of the agency.

Evidence

According to the SAR (pp. 12-23), following the previous review, amendments to guidelines and methodologies were adopted on 2 September 2024. The table below presents, for each QA procedure, the amendments made:

| QA procedure | 2023 Recommendation | Amendments made in September 2024 | Comments |
|---|---|--|----------|
| Accreditation of HEI | Mention ESG I.2 (national qualification framework), I.3 (assessment policies and SCL) | Not amended | |
| Accreditation and assessment of study field | Mention ESG I.2 (national qualification framework), I.3 (assessment policies and SCL) | Guidelines for HEIs and experts have been completed with references to the LQF (I.2), the principles of student-centred teaching and learning, including the assessment (I.3). | |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| Licensing of study programmes | Mention ESG 1.2 (national qualification framework), 1.3 (assessment policies and SCL) | Guidelines for HEIs and experts have been completed with references to the LQF (1.2), the principles of student-centred teaching and learning, including the assessment (1.3). | |
| Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields | Consider all relevant standards of ESG Part I | n. a. | Outside the scope of the ESG |
| Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of a study field | Mention ESG 1.1, 1.2 (national qualification framework), 1.3 (assessment policies and SCL) and 1.8 | n. a. | No longer part of the AIC's portfolio of activities |
| Accreditation of study programmes abroad | Mention ESG 1.1, 1.2 (national qualification framework), 1.3 (assessment policies and SCL) | Methodological description, guidelines for HEIs and experts have been completed with references to the institutional quality policy (1.1). Guidelines for HEIs and experts have also been completed with references to LQF (1.2) and student-centred assessment (1.3). | |

The revised guidelines (versions of 2 September 2024) are publicly available on AIC's website and came into force in September 2024.

Analysis

Of the four activities remaining in the scope of this partial review, three sets of guidelines (Accreditation and assessment of study field, Licensing of study programmes and Accreditation of study programmes abroad) have been modified to make more explicit the elements considered by the previous panel to be insufficiently present.

The new versions of these guidelines came into force in September 2024. Both the expert panels responsible for carrying out these procedures and the institutions have been informed of these changes via the AIC website, as well as through seminars organised by the Agency, which provided an opportunity to go through the various changes that have taken place. During the interviews, the Agency was able to demonstrate the ease and the rapidity with which these adjustments were introduced and widely accepted by stakeholders.

The only framework where no amendments were made is for the Accreditation of HEI. Although this activity is still active in AIC's portfolio of activities, it is conceived as an extraordinary procedure as, up to date, all HEIs in Latvia are accredited for an indefinite term. AIC justifies its choice for not amending this framework as follows: "First of all, (...) the requirements of ESG 1.2 and 1.3 are already covered sufficiently [in this assessment framework] and in general, should be covered in more detail by assessments on the programme (study field) level. Secondly, (...) there is only one institution that is currently undergoing extraordinary accreditation of HEI and no other institutions are expected to undergo this procedure before it ceases to exist." (SAR, p. 13). Moreover, the AIC is in the process of developing a new institutional accreditation model whose methodology will be developed in 2025 before being tested in a pilot phase which should take place in 2026 (see above and the 'additional observations' section). In this context, the AIC representatives explained in the interviews that they have not wished to change the guidelines for the current extraordinary institutional accreditation as this would have led to a potentially confusing communication with HEIs that are preparing to enter a new cyclical institutional accreditation model. Furthermore, the interviews enabled the panel to note that a cross-reference of the future standards for cyclical institutional accreditation with Part I of the ESG is planned in the near future (2025) in order to ensure sufficient and comprehensive cover.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard:

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

2023 review recommendation

- The panel urges the agency to include student-members in all procedures involving external experts, in particular in the procedures for Inclusion of a licensed study programme in the accreditation form of study field and the Assessment of feasibility on changes in study field.
- In 2023 EQAR Register Committee stressed that the group of experts in the inclusion of licenced study programme on the accreditation of study field procedure, does not include a student. While the Committee understands that this procedure was created as a temporary and short-term solution in order to close possible gaps in the accreditation periods of programmes (until the next reaccreditation of the corresponding study field), the Committee could not follow the agency's decision of not involving students, as per the requirement of the standard 2.4.

Evidence

The Agency has established the procedure for the expert selection and it is defined in the Criteria and Principles for the Selection of Experts. The Agency owns a database, which consists of more than 1200 candidates of whom 55% are international experts (2022 SAR p. 65). When composing a panel of experts, the Agency takes a look at each profile and required competencies (like former accreditation experience, educational background, and language proficiency) for the evaluation procedure. Depending on the type of accreditation, the panel size can vary (for institutional accreditation, there are 7 experts and for the assessment of the study field, at least 5) but its core consists of members from academia, social partners and a student member. For each evaluation, a coordinator from the agency supports the expert team and is responsible for the training of the panel members. The experts

from academia are chosen directly by the agency (if needed they can be recommended by foreign agencies). The student experts are delegated by the Student Union of Latvia and the social partner is recommended by the Latvian Employers Confederation. Yet the agency retains the right to reject the candidates if needed (i.e., when the candidate has already carried out a review for the AIC and did not perform satisfactorily, or when the candidate does not demonstrate a sufficient command of English when the procedure is conducted in English). The Agency appoints the chair of the expert team whose responsibility is to manage and divide the tasks among other team members. In the case of institutional accreditations and study field evaluations, the panels of experts also include a secretary who is responsible for writing the report.

The agency annually trains its experts. AIC invites all the local and international experts to participate in these training sessions. Training sessions for the selected experts of a specific accreditation activity (2022 SAR p. 66) are also organised. In general, training sessions consist of theoretical and practical activities so that the experts would be prepared for evidence-based analysis and report writing. Some specific training sessions addressed to student experts are organized together by the Student Union of Latvia and the agency.

Analysis

The agency has formed an extensive expert database and it keeps bringing new experts on a continuous basis. AIC has developed a very open communication system with its stakeholders that allows it to gather up a high-ranking expert team. Having more than half of the experts from abroad is a result of constant communication with the foreign quality assurance agencies from the Baltic region and even further. The current experts highlighted the benefits of the several agency training sessions: as they keep them constantly updated on the improved (or new) agency's activities as well as prepare them for an evaluation, marking the specificity of each HEI or study field. The review panel believes that the panel formation and preparation for the evaluation procedure are well-established in the agency.

In the 2023 ENQA evaluation, the Agency was given a partial compliance mark due to the lack of a student expert being involved in the evaluation procedure of Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accredited study field. During the site visit the Agency explained that this procedure was a temporary solution for the call of the European social fund programme which financed, for example, established educational study field programmes. The Agency expected only several calls for the licensing as there were not many Latvian Higher Education institutions suitable for this call. Since the decision of the EQAR Register Committee, the Agency has legally removed Licensed study programme accreditation procedure from its activity list (amendments to Cabinet Regulation No. 793 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields are in force as of 1st September 2024).

The review panel believes that based on the previous recommendations and current findings, the Agency managed to improve the issues and currently is compliant with the ESG standard 2.4.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard:

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

2023 review recommendation

- The agency should urgently publish accreditation decisions as they are communicated to the institution, including potential tasks and elements taken which are taken into account next to the published experts' reports.
- In 2023 EQAR Register Committee stressed that AIC does publish full reports of the experts panels for its procedures 'Accreditation of higher education institution', 'Assessment and accreditation of a study field', 'Licensing of study programme' and 'Accreditation of study programmes abroad'. The Register Committee further noted however, that these published reports and the decision letter do not reflect the additional elements which have been provided and taken into consideration after the site visit nor the additional tasks given to the higher education institution.

Evidence

The Agency has designed its report templates for all the evaluation procedures. The report is written by the whole expert team and divided into specific report sections depending on the accreditation procedure (currently the Agency has four activities in its portfolio) (SAR p. 10). The submitted report is then reviewed by the Agency coordinators to make sure that the provided statements align consistently with the found evidence. The Agency's E-platform provides public data on the terms of accreditation and the final reports.

The review panel hands in the report to the Study Quality Commission and during that period the higher education institution already can start developing a plan or make changes based on the review panel report. Study Quality Commission gives the full decision document, which includes the reasoning for the decision, decision term and can include additional tasks, if considered necessary by the Commission, based on the current progress in implementing the review panel's recommendations. This document was not publicly available until this year with the changes in the national legislation (amendments to the Cabinet Regulation No. 793 are in force as of 13th August 2024, paragraph 31, and No. 795 are in force as of 27th July 2024, paragraph 28).

The previous review panel in 2023 found that the Study Quality Commission, before the final decision, can assign additional tasks that must be implemented before a certain deadline. The last review panel considered this as a lack of reporting transparency as the mentioned tasks are only communicated between the Study Quality Commission and the evaluated Institution, although ESG 2.6 standard states that full reports with any changes must be publicly available. Also, the previous review panel found it quite difficult to navigate the Agency's E-platform and suggested placing reports and outcomes of national review procedures in one place. The Agency was given partial compliance for this standard in 2023.

Since the last review, there have been changes in the national legislation and with newly approved amendments, full texts of all decisions taken by the Study Quality Commission are now published on the E-platform. The Agency has taken into account the recommendations and improved the report navigation in the E-platform. In the current E-platform version all the documents (panel report, self-evaluation report, commission decision) related to specific study fields are placed under one section.

Analysis

All the review reports are published on the Agency's E-platform (<https://eplatforma.aika.lv/>), which is linked to the Agency's webpage. The expert panel took a look at several reports (study field review on Chemistry in Daugavpils University and Management in College of Business Administration). The report structure follows the Agency guidelines and is well described, has detailed analysis and statements that are evidence-based on the findings in the documents or during the site visit. Before

sending the report to the institutions the Agency double-checks for any potential errors in the text. The representatives of the higher education institutions approved that in most cases the review reports provide suggestions and recommendations that are manageable to cope with.

The higher education institutes receive two documents regarding the accreditation procedure: a review panel report and, later on the final decision document from the Study Quality Commission. The decision document from the Study Quality Commission reinforces the recommendations made by the review panel. The final decision on the accreditation term is made by the Study Quality Commission only based on the statements from the review panel report. The Study Quality Commission cannot make any changes, add any additional information to the final decision document as well as provide “additional tasks” that were not mentioned in the panel report.

From 2024 September, the full Commission decision is publicly available on the Agency’s webpage. The Agency explains that the lack of full reports being published in the past was related to the national legislations of Freedom of Information Law and Personal Data Processing Law, as the reports can possess sensitive data related to budgets and funding, projects etc. (SAR p. 26). The representatives of the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science expressed this issue as a loophole in the national legislation and, based on the previous ENQA review, corrected this error.

The review panel believes that the full review reports are and were publicly available on the Agency’s website. The previously raised issue has been resolved by the Agency. It was mainly related to the publication of the Study Quality Commission legal decision document derived from the review reports for clarification. The panel considers the current solution and the transparency of all documents related to the accreditation procedure sufficient to ensure compliance with the ESG 2.6 standard.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

MOVING TOWARDS A NEW SYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

As described in the introductory section on recent changes in the Latvian higher education system/at AIC, the entire higher education quality assurance system is currently undergoing a massive change. Simply put, the system is moving from programme level approaches to the institutional level one. In this, the agency is at once following the European Commission's proposal to external QA in HE - and trying to create a less costly and bureaucratic framework. In the view of the review panel, this is probably the most important single line of action the agency will be working on in the near future.

During the interviews, the review panel therefore was also delving into the, as an agency member put it the "paradigm shift", in the Latvian QA system. All actors and stakeholders seem to be awaiting the implementation of institutional approach impatiently, mostly hoping for a reduction of workload, less bureaucracy and more institutional autonomy. The review panel considers this broad acceptance a very good basis to build on – but also suggests not to take this shift too lightly. The timeline is highly ambitious, not least because the legal and methodological base had not been finalised by the time of the review - yet the first pilots (with the institutions not yet chosen) will run in 2026. In addition, the panel's combined experience from other countries shows that the view of the higher education institutions as phrased during the interviews, that the new approach will be "similar to what they know but on a more general level" and that they would basically be ready "today", could lead to some disappointments. Providing clarity and establishing the cornerstones asap seems of the utmost importance.

The panel is aware that AIC is working in a dynamic environment and that the workload during the last couple of years has been immense – but a realistic multi-annual working plan would help the agency avoid running into unforeseen problems or clashes of expectations. This is not limited to the new institutional approaches, but in the panel's views also extends to other parts of AIC's strategic plan, e.g. the agency's international operations, where a more concrete operationalisation of the general ambition seems to be pending for now.

The review panel has full confidence in the agency being able to manage the implementation of its strategic goals in light of the capacity shown in the past: in the last year, AIC has implemented a series of changes in a very short space of time, without departing from its own priorities and working principles. This demonstrates the agency's ability to adapt and continue to implement its missions, whatever the context. AIC's staff is incredibly motivated and diligent, and altogether AIC seems pervaded by a sense of responsibility and great team spirit, with people clearly not only caring for the agency but for higher education as such.

In order to further ensure success, **the panel suggests for AIC to start operationalizing all aspects of its strategic plan at the agency's earliest convenience, including realistic timelines and a potential prioritisation of long term objectives and short term goals.**

CONCLUSION

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

| | | |
|---------|-----------|--|
| ESG 3.6 | Compliant | 1. The review panel recommends AIC to include procedures and aspects focusing on effectiveness and impact into their quality manual and array of internal quality procedures and thereby making use of data sources beyond feedback surveys. |
| ESG 2.1 | Compliant | - |
| ESG 2.4 | Compliant | - |
| ESG 2.6 | Compliant | - |

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

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

The panel made further suggestions, which AIC may wish to consider when reflecting on its further development, as signalled in the previous sections:

| | | |
|-------------------------|-----------|--|
| ESG 3.6 | Compliant | 1. The review panel suggests that AIC links its efforts on thematic analyses more closely and visibly to their IQA work, thus creating synergies and mutual benefits. |
| ESG 2.1 | Compliant | - |
| ESG 2.4 | Compliant | - |
| ESG 2.6 | Compliant | - |
| Additional observations | | 2. In order to further ensure success, the panel suggests for AIC to start operationalizing all aspects of its strategic plan at the agency's earliest convenience, including realistic timelines and a potential prioritisation of long term objectives and short term goals. |

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

| SES NO. | TIMING | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW |
|---------------------------|---------------|--|---|
| - | 15:30-17:30 | Review panel's private meeting | - |
| 04.12.2024 – Day I | | | |
| 1 | 10:00 - 11:00 | Meeting with the Head of the Agency and the Chairperson of AIC Board | Head of the Agency Chairperson of AIC Board |
| 2 | 11:15 - 12:00 | Meeting with the senior management team | Head of QA unit Head of development and International cooperation unit |
| 3 | 12:15 – 13:15 | Meeting with staff members involved in review coordination | Senior expert Expert Expert Senior expert Expert |
| 4 | 15:00 – 16:00 | Meeting with representatives of higher education institutions | Rector of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, Rēzekne Academy of Technologies (online) Head of Study Quality Unit, Deputy Director of Study Department, University of Latvia Senior Expert for Study Development, Education Planning and Support Department, National Defence Academy of Latvia Rector, BA School of Business and Finance Vice-Rector for Science and Academic Affairs, Turība University |
| 5 | 16:15 – 17:15 | Meeting with the reviewers | Expert - Vice-Dean for Studies at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Klaipėda University, Lithuania (online) Student Expert, student at the Riga Technical University, Member of the Study Quality Commission, Coordinator |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|--|---|
| | | | <p>of the Student-Expert Pool by the Student Union of Latvia</p> <p>Vice-dean for PR & quality assurance, Head of Marketing Department, University of Primorska, Slovenia (online)</p> <p>Expert – representative of employers, former Deputy Director General for the Employers’ Confederation of Latvia</p> <p>Expert - Director of Study Programmes in Business and Economics, Riga Stradiņš University</p> <p>Expert - Professor of Management, Researcher, Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences, Estonia (online)</p> <p>Expert - Professor at SGH Warsaw School of Economics and Secretary General of the Polish Accreditation Committee, Poland (online)</p> |
| 05.12.2024 – Day 2 | | | |
| 6 | 09:30 - 10:30 | Meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science | Deputy Head for Higher Education, Department for Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Ministry of Education and Science |
| | 15:00 – 15:30 | Final de-briefing meeting with the agency to inform about preliminary findings | |

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW



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Annex I: Terms of Reference for a focused review of the Academic Information Centre (AIC)

This document is to agree on the Terms of Reference (ToR) that address the request of the Academic Information Centre (AIC), Latvia, to undergo a focused review against the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The request follows EQAR Register Committee's decision to reject the application by AIC (Ref. RC41/A133, 12 December 2023, annex 1 to this document).

Chapter 1: Background and request of AIC for a focused review

AIC approached ENQA to coordinate a focused review addressing those issues that led to the rejection of the agency's application for inclusion on the Register. EQAR's 'Procedures for Applications' (§3.21) allow the agency to undergo such a focused review, and to reapply within 18 months based on this review.

Subsequently, on 9 May 2024 AIC approached ENQA to coordinate the abovementioned focused review and prepare a review report that will be considered for the purpose of EQAR-registration. On 27 May 2024, ENQA agreed to coordinate the focused review. The review follows ENQA methodology for partial reviews (see ENQA Rules of Procedure, article 7, and ENQA's policy on partial reviews of members under review) that is aligned with the requirements of a focused review for the purposes of EQAR-registration. In case of provisions not covered by ENQA's policy on partial reviews of members under review, the Guidelines for ENQA Agency Reviews (for full reviews) are to be followed.

Chapter 2: Purpose and scope of the focused review

Chapter 2.1: Activities within the scope of the ESG

The focused review will address the above mentioned ESG standards through the following external QA activities of AIC:

1. Accreditation of higher education institution
2. Assessment and accreditation of a study field
3. Licensing of study programme
4. Accreditation of study programmes abroad

The following activities are considered to be outside of the scope of the ESG as they do not cover provisions on EHEA QF level 6-8, unless the panel comes across new evidence that proves otherwise¹:

1. Inclusion of a licensed study programme on the accreditation form of study field (i.e., the activity that was included in the agency's full review against the ESG in 2023 but was removed from the agency's portfolio of activities following the changes to Cabinet Regulation No. 793 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields" (subpoints 1.1., 1.2 and 1.5) that will be in force as of 1st September 2024).
2. Assessment of feasibility on changes in study fields (i.e. study programmes) where the EQAR Register Committee in its decision Ref. RC41/A133 from 12.12.2023 noted that "this is not an activity within the scope of the ESG and has thus not considered it in its assessment of AIC's compliance with the ESG".

¹ Should this be the case, the coordinator is expected to inform EQAR at the earliest convenience and request an amendment of the terms of reference.

Should any substantive changes occur in AIC between now and the review (e.g. organisational changes, the introduction or changes of activities within or outside of the scope of the ESG), the agency should inform EQAR at its earliest convenience.

The following standards were judged as partially compliant by EQAR Register Committee (see EQAR Register Committee's decision not to include the agency on the Register, Ref. RC41/A133, 12 December 2023), and the following aspects are thus expected to be covered in the review:

- ESG 2.1 (Consideration of internal quality assurance) regarding whether the standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.8 of the ESG are covered within the portfolio of EQA activities of the agency;
- ESG 2.4 (Peer review experts) regarding whether the agency includes student-members in all procedures involving external experts;
- ESG 2.6 (Reporting) regarding whether AIC improved transparency in its reporting processes (i.e., publishing of full decisions together with the reports, including reflecting on the additional elements which have been provided and taken into consideration after the site visit and the additional tasks given to the higher education institution);
- ESG 3.6 (Internal quality assurance and professional conduct) regarding whether the agency has a consolidated internal quality assurance system, including internal and external feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement.

The report should also confirm whether the other findings (in regard of those standards not covered in depth now) of the full review report of 28 June 2023 remain valid.

Chapter 2.2: Content and preparation of the review report

The agency is expected to produce a self-assessment report on the points raised above, indicating changes that have taken place since the last full review. In particular, the agency shall elaborate on the legislative changes leading to the removal of any EQA activities from the agency's overall portfolio, following the full review in 2023. In addition, the agency will indicate any eventual changes and developments in the agency's activities since 2023 until today beyond those listed under the criteria under scrutiny, and that might be relevant in view of the agency's ESG compliance. This requirement follows ENQA's policy on partial reviews of members under review, Content, p. 2, and EQAR's Procedures for Applications².

The focused review foresees a site visit (in person) to the agency.

Following the site visit, a review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined above. In particular, the review report will concentrate on the same criteria as in a full review and assess how the compliance has evolved since this last review. Furthermore, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG³ to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR. Finally, the report will also assess any eventual changes that have been brought to the attention of the panel in the self-assessment report.

² <https://www.eqar.eu/about/official-documents/#procedures-for-applications>

³ The Use and Interpretations of the ESG are available at the following link:
https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2020/09/RC_12_1_UseAndInterpretationOfTheESG_v3_0.pdf

Chapter 3: Panel composition

The ENQA Agency Review Committee will nominate three external reviewers to complete the task. The composition of the panel for the AIC's full review in 2023 was as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Brian Norton | Chair (EUA nominee), academic |
| Pieter-Jan Van de Velde | Secretary (ENQA nominee), quality assurance professional |
| Ieva Vaiciukevičienė | Panel member (ENQA nominee), quality assurance professional |
| Michał Goszczyński | Panel member (ESU nominee, member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool) |

For the focused review, ENQA will use one member of the panel which carried out the last full review, to the extent possible, in order to ensure consistency, sufficient background knowledge on the agency, and the external trust in the outcomes (independent of the Agency Review Committee). The two other panel members will be selected so to complement the panel with altogether three viewpoints, that of a student, an academic and a quality assurance professional.

One of the panel members will be appointed as a Chair of the panel. The panel secretary will be appointed by the Chair, should the Chair not cover the secretarial tasks.

The panel members will be asked whether they are willing and able to carry out the work within the timeline as listed in chapter 4 of the terms of reference.

Chapter 4: Timeline

| | Deadline |
|---|----------------------------|
| Terms of Reference agreed with AIC and EQAR | June 2024 |
| Appointment of focused review panel members and agreement on reviewer contracts | July 2024 |
| Completion of focused review SAR by AIC | 31 August 2024 |
| Delivery of the final SAR to the panel | September 2024 |
| Site visit to AIC | Early December 2024 |
| Delivery of draft report to ENQA Secretariat | December 2024/January 2025 |
| Draft report to AIC for a factual check | January 2025 |
| Completion of report and submission to ENQA | January 2025 |
| Report validation by ENQA Agency Review Committee | February 2025 |
| EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application | March 2025 |

Chapter 5: Costs

| ITEM | COST |
|---|---------|
| Expert fee - Chair | € 2 000 |
| Expert fee - panel member | € 1 500 |
| Expert fee - panel member | € 1 500 |
| Coordination fee ENQA | € 2 500 |
| Site visit (estimate, full actual cost to be covered by the | € 2 500 |



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| | |
|----------------------|-----------------|
| agency) ⁴ | |
| TOTAL | € 10 000 |

Chapter 6: Annexes

Annex 1: EQAR Register Committee's decision not to include the agency on the Register, Ref. RC41/A133, 12 December 2023



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⁴ Calculation is based on four return flights to Latvia (three experts and a review coordinator), and two nights in a hotel as proposed by the agency under review.

ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

| | |
|------|---|
| AIC | Academic Information Center |
| ENQA | European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education |
| EQAR | European quality assurance register |
| EQAR | European quality assurance register - Register Committee |
| ESG | <i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i> |
| HE | higher education |
| HEI | higher education institution |
| QA | quality assurance |
| SAR | self-assessment report |
| TOR | Terms of reference |

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY AIC

AIC Internal Quality Management Manual

Annex I of the Quality Management Manual

Handbook for assessment coordinators

List of decisions taken since September 2024 and published on the AIC e-platform

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

AIC Internal Rules and Regulations, <https://www.aika.lv/en/laws-and-regulations-publications/internal-rules-and-regulations/>

ENQA AGENCY REVIEW 2025

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Agency
Review of the Academic Information Centre (AIC),
undertaken in 2024.

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