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Concept Report on the Implementation of Institutional Accreditation in Latvia

Report developed within the project
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The report on the implementation of institutional accreditation in Latvia has been developed within the framework of the European Union ERASMUS + K3 program "Support for policy reforms" project "Road Map for Implementation of Institutional Assessment", with the aim to prepare the transition to cyclical institutional accreditation of higher education institutions from 2025.

The views of HEIs and colleges, students and employers, experience provided by international experts and quality assurance agencies from other countries, as well as Latvia's experience in developing the quality assurance system were considered in the development of the report.

The report consists of a description and analysis of the existing system, information provided by foreign agencies on the quality assurance system in their country, including cyclical accreditation of HEIs and colleges, as well as providing an insight into further steps towards the introduction of the new system.

INTRODUCTION

Paris Communiqué (2018)¹ reconfirms that through the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) the large-scale student mobility has been facilitated, the comparability and transparency of higher education systems has been improved, as well as the quality and attractiveness of higher education has been increased. It is stated that quality assurance is key in developing mutual trust as well as increasing mobility and fair recognition of qualifications and study periods throughout the EHEA. The progress made in implementing the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (ESG)² is significant in all EHEA countries. The development of the Latvian national quality assurance system was one of the first higher education reforms in the independent Latvia, taking place in the beginning of 1990s even before the initiation of the Bologna process. However, the Bologna process shaped and directed the reforms in line with the EHEA. The Bologna implementation report 2018 illustrates how successfully the ESG 2015 have been transposed into external quality assurance practice. Latvia is among those countries where a majority of the ESG elements are required or usually happen in practice. However, there are several elements which are not integrated into typical external quality assurance processes. In these systems, while the model for external quality assurance may consider that certain elements need not be directly addressed in external quality assurance processes, it is also possible that improvements could be made to integrate all main aspects of the ESG 2015. In 2015 Latvian Academic Information Centre (AIC) was authorised by the government to perform quality assurance functions. In 2018 AIC has been successfully reviewed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and became full member of ENQA.

External quality assurance in its various forms can verify the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance, act as a catalyst for improvement and offer the institution new perspectives. It will also provide information to assure the institution and the public of the quality of the institution's activities. Depending on

¹Paris Communiqué, Paris, May 25th 2018

http://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2018_Paris/77/1/EHEAParis2018_Communique_final_952771.pdf

²Standarti un vadlīnijas kvalitātes nodrošināšanai Eiropas augstākās izglītības telpā (ESG 2015)
http://www.aic.lv/portal/content/files/AIC%20ESG2015%20int-1_2.pdf

the legislative framework, external quality assurance may take different forms and focus at different organisational levels (such as programme, faculty or institution).³ Currently, there are three main quality assurance procedures in Latvia – accreditation of HEI, accreditation of study directions and licensing of new study programmes, but there is a general tendency to move the quality assurance to institutional level. It is becoming a practice that the quality assurance agencies revise their methodology after a full cycle of quality assurance procedures using a unified methodology.⁴ In Latvia there is a lack of a regular external quality assurance mechanism that would look deeper into strategic management, the internal quality assurance system and the development strategies on an institutional level. Based on the previous experience, not all issues that should be evaluated can be properly tackled by programme evaluation or by the evaluation of programme groups (study fields). Already before starting the new cycle of assessments for study directions, there are discussions about further systemic changes that could happen after the current assessment cycle is finished. Higher education institutions in Latvia have a rather high level of operational autonomy and this is reflected in the internal processes for quality assurance. In order to change the system, it is important that the top management of higher education institutions feel the impact of external quality assurance and be held accountable for institutional quality⁵. **In order to improve the quality assurance system in Latvia, it is necessary to introduce cyclical accreditation of higher education institutions as the main quality assurance procedure**, thus reducing both the current overlap between the various existing quality assurance procedures and the administrative burden and evaluation procedure costs. This is also confirmed by the Government's 2019 Action Plan⁶ (activity No. 60.04.), which states that in order to increase the quality and

³ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf#:~:text=The%20ESG%20are%20a%20set%20of%20standards%20and,mutual%20trust%20in%20higher%20education%20in%20the%20EHEA.

⁴ Kvalitātes uzlabošana: no politikas līdz praksei. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Kvalit%C4%81tes-uzlabo%C5%A1ana-no-politikas-l%C4%ABdz-praksei.pdf>

⁵ Kažoka A., Silka J., Rauhvargers A. (2018) Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Moving-Quality-Assurance-from-Programme-to-Institutional-Level.pdf>

⁶ Ministru kabineta 2019. gada 7. maija rīkojums Nr. 210 "Par Valdības rīcības plānu Deklarācijas par Artura Krišjāņa Kariņa vadītā Ministru kabineta iecerēto darbību īstenošanai". <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/306691> (In Latvian)

international competitiveness of universities and research institutions, as well as to attract funding from Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, it is planned to carry out the necessary consolidation in the activities of universities and research institutions. To achieve this, the Government`s 2019 Action Plan sets out the activity "To set the implementation of cyclic institutional accreditation of higher education institutions from 2024", which intends to develop and submit for consideration to the Cabinet of Ministers proposals for the implementation of cyclical institutional accreditation of higher education institutions and proposals for regulatory framework.

1. DESCRIPTION OF CURRENT SITUATION

1.1. Typology and Strategic Specialization of Higher Education Institutions

In order to strengthen research-based, internationally competitive higher education institutions, the development of the higher education network has been launched in Latvia, introducing a new typology of higher education institutions and their strategic specialisation. As indicated in the World Bank report on the internal financing and governance of Latvian higher education institutions⁷, there is a need to improve the strategies of institutions in terms of both form and content. Support of the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia for strengthening the strategic planning capacity of HEIs governance will promote the development of high quality strategies to achieve public policy goals. The state education policy can be implemented only through specific actions of educational institutions, which must be coordinated with the policy documents. HEIs strategies should be easily perceived, applied and monitorable.

On June 8, 2021, the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia adopted significant amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions for the Latvian higher education system, envisaging various types of higher education institutions and the set of requirements for them, which is assessed as the significant turning point in the

⁷ PB (2017). Latvijas augstākās izglītības institūciju iekšējā finansēšana un pārvaldība: ziņojums. . Pieejams: <https://izm.gov.lv/lv/izglitiba/augstaka-izglitiba/augstakas-izglitibas-finansesanas-modelis/pasaules-bankas-petijums-par-augstakas-izglitibas-parvaldibu>

higher education system. The Law on Higher Education Institutions defines this type of higher education institution: *universities* (zinātnes universitātes), *universities of arts and culture* (mākslu un kultūras universitātes), *universities of applied sciences* (lietišķo zinātņu universitātes) and *university colleges* (lietišķo zinātņu augstskola).⁸, as well as the founder of the HEI determines the strategic specialization of the HEI in order to achieve internationally recognized excellence and compliance with the needs and requirements of the society in the chosen fields of science in the study and research activities of the HEI⁹

The mentioned types of HEI are different with the purpose of the HEI, the scale of strategic specialization, as well as with the different tasks of the HEI set for the HEI to achieve its goals, therefore the type defined for HEIs is determined according to the defined compliance indicators for which specific achievable values have been set, taking into account both the results achieved by the HEI in recent years and potential changes in these indicators, including indicative investments in higher education and science, which are set out in the *Guidelines for the Development of Education for 2021-2027* and in the *Guidelines for the Development of Science, Technology and Innovation for 2021-2027*. In determining the appropriate type of HEI, the principle of setting it carefully was applied in order to avoid potential situations in which a different type could be determined at a later stage, after aggregation, lowering what could have a negative effect on the HEI`s reputation and prestige.

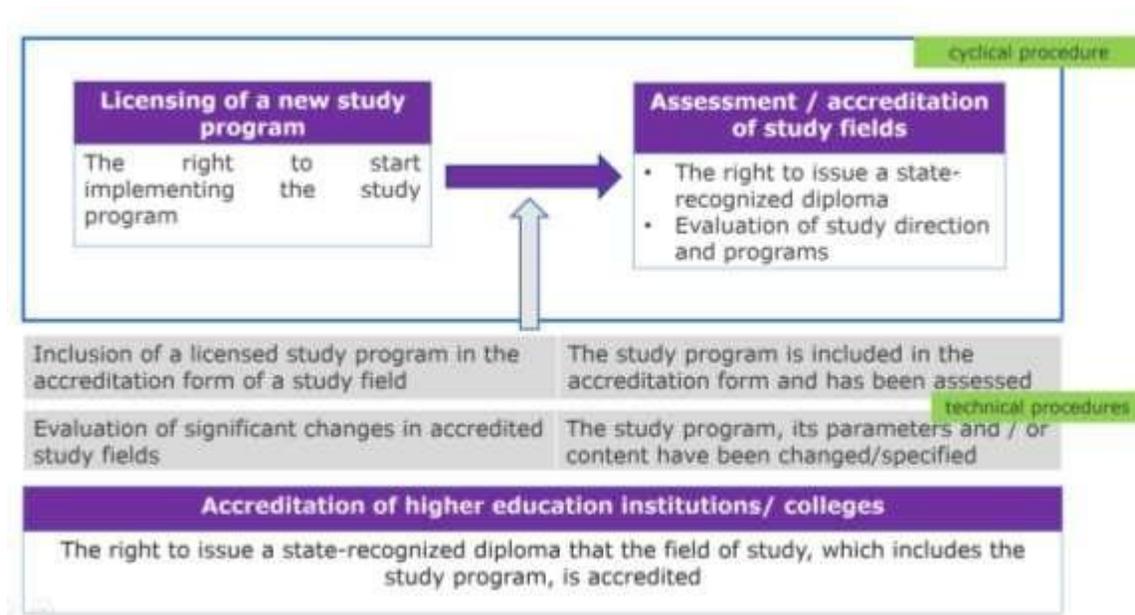
Transitional Provisions of the Law of Higher Education Institutions stipulates that from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2024, the Academic Information Center (AIC) shall assess the compliance of HEIs, registered in the Register of Educational Institutions, until 15 August 2021 with the type of HEIs specified by the founder.

⁸ Augstskolu likuma 3.panta 1.daļa <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/37967-augstskolu-likums> (In Latvian)

⁹ Augstskolu likuma 3.panta 1.prim daļa <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/37967-augstskolu-likums> (In Latvian)

1.2. Existing Quality Assurance System in Latvia

Currently, the quality assurance model in Latvia includes three stages – **licencing of all new study programmes** (initial assessment), **cyclical accreditation of study fields** (every two or six years) and **accreditation of HEIs or Colleges for an indefinite term** (1. Picture).



1. Picture: The main quality assurance processes performed in Latvia

Considering that the cyclical nature is the procedure for the evaluation and accreditation of study fields, it should be evaluated as a basic procedure, respectively, as a result it is possible to obtain the most detailed information for the analysis of the future situation and identification of areas for improvement. When assessing the nature of the procedures “Evaluation of significant Changes in accredited study fields” and “Inclusion of a licensed study program in the accreditation form of of a study field”, they are assessed as technical procedures and are not subject to all ESG requirements. At the same time, as far as possible, these procedures are organized in accordance with the good practice obtained within the framework of licensing of study programs and evaluation and accreditation of study fields.

When developing guidelines for higher education institutions / colleges and assessment experts in the framework of study program licensing, assessment and accreditation of study fields, and accreditation of higher education institutions / colleges, AIKA has complied with ESG Part 1 standards by integrating them into the criteria set out in the guidelines, in turn, requirements specified in the ESG Part 2 standards were integrated in the methodologies of the assessment procedures.

Information on the procedures for external quality assessment and their objectives is provided below.

1.2.1. Licensing procedure of study programmes

Licensing of a study programme means the granting of rights to a higher education institution or a college or the branches thereof to implement a specific study programme¹⁰. License of a study programme gives the HEIs or colleges the rights to implement a certain study programme.

License is a prerequisite for announcing admission and enrolling students. Each new study programme has to be licensed and only after that students could be enrolled.

In order to apply for the licence, the HEI or college shall submit to AIKA an application and description of the study programme with the relevant annexes, as prepared in compliance with Cabinet Regulation No. 795 of 11 December 2018 "Regulations on Licensing of Study Programmes"¹¹ and the *Guidelines for the Preparation of the Description of a Study Programme*¹².

The requirements subject to assessment within the licensing process are as follows:

The Structure of the Description of a Study Programme

- I.** Compliance of the study programme with the study direction
- II.** Resources and provision of the study programme
- III.** Study content and the mechanism for the implementation of the study programme
- IV.** Teaching staff
- V.** Compliance of the study programme with the provisions of regulatory enactments
- VI.** Annexes

Other documents which the higher education institution/ college shall provide at its own discretion

¹⁰ Law on Higher Education Institutions. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967> (Section 1, Paragraph 12)

¹¹ Cabinet Regulation No. 795 of 11 December 2018 "Regulations on Licensing of Study Programmes" <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303957-regulations-regarding-licensing-of-study-programmes>

¹² The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Description of a Study Programme. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-the-Description-of-a-Study-Programme.pdf>

- compliance of the study program with the requirements of the Law on Higher Education Institutions and other regulatory enactments;
- the compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members, visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers, and visiting assistants with conditions for the implementation of the study program and the requirements of regulatory enactments;
- the compliance of the study provision, informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision with the requirements for the implementation of a study programme;
- the content and implementation mechanism of the study program to be licensed;
- the conformity of the actual circumstances with the information provided;
- whether the violations of regulatory enactments established by the competent authorities in the activities of the higher education institution or college during the previous year prior to the day of making the decision have been eliminated within the term specified by these authorities;
- compliance of the study program with the study field in which it is planned to include it.

Within the framework of the assessment, a **group of three experts**, one of whom is a representative of the Latvian academics, one delegated representative of the Latvian Employers' Confederation and one delegated representative of the Latvian Students' Association, evaluates the study program. As part of the evaluation, the experts' group reviews the application prepared by the HEI / college, the description of the study program and binding appendixes, have an on-site visit in the HEI / college and prepares a joint report. Group of experts prepare a joint report, within which an analysis of certain criteria is performed, as well as a proposal regarding the licensing of the study program or refusal to license the study program and recommendations for the elimination of the identified deficiencies or long-term improvement of the study program.

The **license of the study program is indefinite or is valid until its revocation**, at the same time, according to the Cabinet Regulation No. 793.

"Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields"¹³, a diploma recognized by the state on the basis of the received license may be received only within two years after the commencement of the implementation of the study program.

As was shown in 1. Picture, an additional procedure is required in connection with the licensing of the new study program – **inclusion of licensed study programm in the accreditation form of a study field** and is applicable to study programmes that have been licensed after the accreditation of the relevant study field and that have to obtain an evaluation according to the paragraph 17 of the Cabinet Regulation No. 793. "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields"¹⁴.

Inclusion of licensed study programm in the accreditation form **is not applicable** to study programmes that have been submitted for accreditation together with the study field within two years since the programme has started operation

HEI or college prepare application and **report** according to the *Guidelines for preparing the report*¹⁵ and submitted in Latvian with translation in English.



The study programm is **evaluated and on-site visited by 2 experts** where one expert is from Latvia and the other one is a foreign expert, both representing the field of the study programme submitted for inclusion in the accreditation form of a study field.



Experts prepare the report in English, according to the guidelines developed for the joint report of experts¹⁶.



Study Quality Committee (SQC) makes decision within four month about inclusion of a study programme on the accreditation form of a study field, which is based on the documentation submitted by the HEI or college, joint report of the experts and other information possessed by the SQC.

The Structure of the Guidelines:

Application

I. Information about the study field

II. Description of the study program

1. Characteristics of the study program
2. Actuality of the study program
3. Resources and provision of the study programme

4. Implementation of the recommendations received in the licensing of the study program

III. Annexes

IV. Examples of annexes

¹³ Cabinet Regulation No. 793. of 11 December 2018 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields", <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303956>

¹⁴ Cabinet Regulation No. 793. of 11 December 2018 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields", <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303956>

¹⁵ Vadlīnijas ziņojuma izstrādei par licencētas studiju programmas iekļaušanu studiju virziena akreditācijas lapā. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/AIIVadl%C4%ABnijas_jauna-procedura_final.pdf (In Latvian)

¹⁶ Vadlīnijas ekspertu kopīgajam atzinumam licencētas studiju programmas iekļaušanai studiju virziena akreditācijas lapā. https://www.aika.lv/wpcontent/uploads/2021/02/Ekspertu_atzinums_jauna-procedura_final.pdf (In Latvian)

It is important to note that the first application for the procedure was received at the end of 2021 and by May 30, 2022, four decisions have been made within this procedure regarding the inclusion of licensed study programs in the accreditation form of the study field.

1.2.2. Assessment / Accreditation procedure of study field

It is an inspection to determine 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 field in accordance with the laws and regulations.¹⁷

The only cyclical assessment procedure

The study fields and requirements for assessment are fixed in the Cabinet Regulation No. 793 of 11 December 2018 "*Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields*"¹⁸. The accreditation of the study field gives the HEI 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 field.

A study field is assessed according to the following requirements:

- whether higher education institutions or colleges, internal quality assurance system of the higher education institution or college in compliance with the requirements referred to the Law on Higher Education Institutions, shall guarantee constant improvement, development, and efficiency of the study field;
- conformity of scientific research and artistic creation with the development level of science and artistic creation (if applicable);
- co-operation implemented within the scope of the study field with various Latvian and foreign organisations ensures the achievement of the objectives of the study field;
- elimination of the discovered deficiencies and shortcomings and implementation of the recommendations provided during previous assessment of the study field, if such has been carried out.

¹⁷ Law on Higher Education Institutions. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967> (Section 9, Paragraph 16)

¹⁸ Cabinet Regulation No. 793 of 11 December 2018 "*Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields*", Annex 1, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303956>

The accreditation procedure of the study fields consists of two stages:

- the assessment of the study field, which involves **the preparation of the self-assessment report, the on-site visit by experts, and the preparation of the joint report by the experts;**
- the accreditation of the study direction, which involves taking the decision.

HEI or college shall prepare the **self-assessment report**, which have been prepared in compliance with the *Guidelines for the Preparation of the Self-Assessment Report of a Study Direction*¹⁹.

The criteria for assessing study fields for accreditation purpose are divided into two – **for assessing study fields** and **for assessing each study programme** that belongs to a particular study field. The criteria for the study field states that there must be a strategy/plan for the development of a study field, a defined and functional management structure, and a unified internal quality assurance system. The criteria for the study programme are focused on its organisation, content and learning outcomes.

The study field is **evaluated and on-site visited by** a group of experts consisting of at least **5 experts**.

The Structure of the Self-Assessment Report:

Part I. Information on the Higher Education Institution/ College

Part II. Description of the Study Direction

1. Management of the Study Direction
2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System
3. Resources and Provision of the Study Direction
4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation
5. Cooperation and Internationalisation
6. Implementation of the Recommendations Received During the Previous Assessment Procedures

Part III. Description of the Study Programme "..."

1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme
2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof
3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme
4. Teaching Staff

Part IV. Annexes

Other documents which the higher education institution/ college considers relevant

¹⁹Guidelines for the Preparation of the Self-Assessment Report of a Study Direction. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-the-Self-Assessment-Report-of-a-Study-Direction.pdf>

The aim of the on-site visit is to gain as much information as possible on the study fields and the relevant study programmes in order to carry out a comprehensive and unbiased assessment in compliance with the requirements mentioned above. After the on-site visit, the **experts group shall prepare a joint report** in compliance with the criteria specified in *the Guidelines for the preparation of the joint report by the experts group on the assessment of the study field*²⁰.

Decision on the accreditation of study field is taken by the SQC. Study fields can be accredited for two terms – **6 years** (positive decision) or **2 years** (conditional decision, if substantial deficiency is detected but may be eliminated within the scope of the time period of accreditation of the study field). In case of negative decision study field is no accredited.

In the evaluation of the study field, increased attention is paid to the implementation of the recommendations provided within the framework of the previous evaluation procedures, thus linking all quality external evaluation procedures and emphasizing the cyclical nature of the evaluation procedure.

Since 1 January 2019, the HEIs or colleges are allowed to select any agency listed on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) for the assessment of the study direction.

²⁰ The Guidelines for the Preparation of the Joint Report by the Experts Group on the Assessment of a Study Direction. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-the-Joint-Report-by-the-Experts-Group-on-the-Assessment-of-a-Study-Direction.pdf>

As it was shown in 1. Picture, **an additional procedure is required in connection with the assessment of changes to the accredited study field.** The **procedure** for the admissibility of changes in the study field **is an assessment**, as a result of which the higher education institution or college is granted for permission to make significant changes in the study programs corresponding to the study field. According to the Cabinet Regulation No. 793. "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields"²¹, the procedure shall be implemented in cases where the HEI or college introduces significant changes to the study field, which correspond to any of the following cases:



In order to introduce changes to the study direction, the HEI or college shall **submit** to AIKA **an application in free form by describing the changes to be introduced and justifying the need for these changes.**

The changes of the study field is **evaluated and on-site visited by 1 expert** for one study programm.

The **expert prepares a report** in free form by specifying the procedure of the on-site visit, the obtained facts, and the opinions of the representatives of the higher education institution or college, and provide recommendations on the admissibility of the changes to the study field, for which the higher education institution or college has applied.

SQC makes the decision on the admissibility of the changes by taking into consideration the application of the higher education institution or college, report of the expert, and other information available to the SQC.

²¹ Cabinet Regulation No. 793. of 11 December 2018 "Regulations Regarding Opening and Accreditation of Study Fields", <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303956>

Given the nature of the procedure, it should be noted that **this is not a cyclical procedure** and only applies if the HEI or college wishes to make the changes mentioned above. In most cases, changes in the study field and the corresponding programs are a matter of HEI or college autonomy and are approved without the involvement of external experts.

1.2.3. Accreditation of Higher Education Institution /College

Currently, the Law on Higher Education Institutions states that the purpose of accreditation of higher education institutions or colleges is an assessment of the work organisation and quality of resources of a higher education institution or college as a result of which it is granted the status of a State-recognised higher education institution or college²². The HEIs or colleges are **accredited for an indefinite term** and the extraordinary accreditation of a HEI can be initiated in case of violations of regulatory acts, not providing the study base, information base and / or study quality in accordance with the requirements referred to the Law of Higher Education Institutions.

Accreditation shall be performed in accordance with the accreditation regulations regarding accreditation of higher education institutions and colleges²³ approved by the Cabinet, and is organised by the AIC. In order to apply for accreditation, the higher education institution or college shall submit to AIKA an application, which has been prepared in compliance with the *The Guidelines for the Preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of*

The Structure of the Self-Assessment Report

Basic information about the higher education institution / college:

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

Annexes

²² Law on Higher Education Institutions. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/37967> (Section 1, Paragraph 3)

²³ Cabinet Regulation No. 794 of 11 December 2018 "Regulations Regarding Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Colleges", <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/303892>

*Higher Education Institutions/ Colleges*²⁴, preparing a **Self-Assessment report** in accordance with the internal procedures of the higher education institution or college.

The requirements subject to assessment within the accreditation process are as follows:

- the compliance of the qualification of the academic staff members, visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers, and visiting assistants with the provisions specified in the Law on Institutions of Higher Education;
- the compliance of the academic staff development policy and incentive system developed by the higher education institution or college with the aims and objectives set by the higher education institution or college;
- the compliance of the study provision, informative provision (including libraries), material and technical provision, and financial provision with the requirements for the implementation of a study programme;
- the implementation of the internal quality assurance system of the higher education institution or college in compliance with the requirements referred to the Law on Higher Education Institutions, ensuring constant improvement, development, and efficient performance of the higher education institution or college;
- to what extent the provisions regarding autonomy, funding, and rights of the students' self-governance are complied with;
- the data accumulated in the education quality monitoring system of the higher education institution or college as evidence for indication of the improvement and development of the performance of the higher education institution or college;
- the compliance of the activities of the higher education institution or college with the requirements prescribed in regulatory enactments on higher education; and

²⁴ The Guidelines for the Preparation of a Self-Assessment Report of Higher Education Institutions/ Colleges. http://aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Guidelines-for-the-Preparation-of-a-Self-Assessment-Report-of-Higher-Education-Institutions_Colleges.pdf

- the elimination of the violations of the provisions prescribed in the regulatory enactments, as identified by the competent authorities, regarding the performance of the higher education institution or college in the previous year prior to taking the decision in line with the deadline set by the mentioned authorities.

In order to evaluate these requirements, the *Criteria for the evaluation of the requirements towards the higher education institution or college*²⁵ have been developed.

The higher education institution or college is **evaluated and on-site visited by** a group of experts consisting of **7 experts**, including one delegated representative of the Latvian Employers' Confederation or the expert council of the sector corresponding to the

The aim of the on-site visit is to gain as much information as possible on the higher education institution or college, their study fields and the relevant study programmes **in order to carry out a comprehensive and unbiased assessment of the performance of the higher education institution or college**

strategic specialization of the higher education institution or college, or a delegated representative of the professional sectoral organisation, if an appropriate sectoral expert board has not been established, one delegated representative of the Student Union of Latvia, and at least two foreign experts. After the on-site visit, the **experts group shall prepare a report** in compliance with the *Guidelines for the preparation of the joint report by the experts group on the assessment of the higher education institution or college*²⁶.

The decision on the accreditation of HEIs and colleges is made by the Council of Higher Education (CHE) within six month of the receiving the application. The CHE shall take the decision on the accreditation of HEI or college, if the higher education institution or college complies with all requirements mentioned above.

In order to understand the role of HEI or college accreditation in the overall quality assessment process, it should be noted that since 2016, when accreditation and licensing functions were transferred to AIC, accreditation procedures of two were

²⁵ Criteria for the evaluation of the requirements towards the higher education institution or college. https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Kriteriji-augstskolas-vai-koledzas-prasibu-novertesanai_2019.pdf (In Latvian)

²⁶The guidelines for the preparation of the joint report of the group of experts for institutions of higher education or colleges. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Guidelines-for-the-preparation-of-the-joint-report-of-the-group-of-experts-for-HEI.pdf>

carried out, one of which was the initial accreditation, which resulted in the accreditation of the college and the right to issue a state-recognized diploma, while the second was an extraordinary accreditation, as a result of which the college was not accredited and was removed from the Register of Educational Institutions.

Evaluating the processes and procedures of the existing quality assurance system for higher education, the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system are highlighted (2.Picture):



2. Picture: Strengths and weaknesses of the existing quality assurance system for higher education in Latvia

Currently, the assessment of compliance with legal requirements is not always separated from the quality assessment of study programmes and institutions and this leads to an extensive documentation and written proofs that have to be provided by the institutions and reviewed by the agency and the experts. Therefore, it is important to assess the administrative burden on the higher education institutions and the agency, to make sure that this is decreased in order to make the process more efficient²⁷.

²⁷ Kažoka A., Silka J., Rauhvargers A. (2018) *Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level*. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Moving-Quality-Assurance-from-Programme-to-Institutional-Level.pdf>

Taking into account that the only cyclical assessment procedure in Latvia is an accreditation of the study fields, it was important also to clarify the benefits of an assessment and accreditation of study fields (4.Picture).



4. Picture: Benefits of an assessment and accreditation of study fields

1.3. Doctoral Schools and International Evaluation of Scientific Institutions' Activity

On April 11, 2022, the amendments to the Law on Higher Education Institutions and the Law on Scientific Activity prepared by the MoES were submitted for public discussion, which envisages full introduction of a new doctoral model by the end of 2024 and a unified and unambiguous understanding of the Law on Higher

Education Law, so that higher education institutions, in developing and implementing their procedures, can implement doctoral studies in accordance with good international practice. According to the Cabinet of Ministers Order No. 345 "On the Conceptual Report" On the Introduction of a New Doctoral Model in Latvia "" it is envisaged that doctoral study programs will have to be organized centrally - in **doctoral schools** -, taking institutional responsibility for research-based studies. The new model sets an equal requirements for doctoral schools, thus increasing the overall quality of doctoral study programs throughout the country - with a single institutional framework for quality assurance at all stages of doctoral studies (common approach, common standards, common quality management system). It is envisaged that from September 1, 2023 higher education institutions will be able to start the establishment of doctoral schools and the implementation of doctoral studies in accordance with the new doctoral model, but their establishment will be possible if it has the **appropriate performance in the specified field of science**. This means that the doctoral school, where the doctoral study program is implemented, is subject not only to the procedure of licensing the study program or accreditation of the study field, but also to the results of the evaluation of the scientific institution`s activity, where the doctoral school will be established and the doctoral study program will be implemented. According to the regulatory framework²⁸, the international evaluation of scientific institutions activity is performed once every six years. Their first evaluation was carried out in 2013, in which 150 scientific institutions participated, but the second evaluation - in 2019 (for the period from 2013 to 2018). 38 scientific institutions (out of 62 registered in Latvia) participated in the second evaluation.

The activities of scientific institutions are evaluated according to 5 main criteria:

- Scientific Quality
- Impact on the Scientific Discipline
- Economic and Social Impact
- Research Environment and Infrastructure of the Institution
- Development Potential of the Institution

²⁸ Ministru kabineta 2018. gada 2. oktobra noteikumi Nr. 619 "Zinātnisko institūciju darbības starptautiskā novērtējuma organizēšanas kārtība". <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/301995>

Similar to the evaluation of study fields, scientific institutions must also prepare and submit a self-evaluation report for each branch of Latvian science²⁹ that the scientific institution has applied for evaluation. The evaluation is performed by foreign experts, who, based on the developed methodology³⁰, prepare a joint report of the experts with the evaluation of the scientific institution in the field or sectors of science applied for evaluation. HEIs, which are also registered as scientific institutions at the same time, are further evaluated in the context of their scientific activities, and doctoral studies is also one of the aspects to be assessed in relation to the scientific activities of the HEI`s. Respectively, currently HEIs, which are also scientific institutions, need to perform two cyclical assessments - accreditation of study fields and international evaluation of scientific activities, where in both cases the aspect to be evaluated is doctoral studies (if the HEI implements it), research activities is also an aspect to be assessed. This indicates duplication or overlap of certain aspects to be assessed in the self-assessment reports, which the higher education institution must prepare when accrediting the study fields and preparing for the international evaluation of scientific activities.

2. International Experience

Quality assurance systems in higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have developed very dynamically, but differently at national level. European countries choose a suitable external quality assurance model, depending on national context and objectives. Given that the higher education systems of EHEA are changing over time, quality assurance systems are also changing accordingly and are also influenced by political and financial aspects. It is important to note that changes to the assessment procedures and models applied in most cases are made after the collection and analysis of comprehensive data from the evaluation procedure carried out, which provides a clear insight into what are the

²⁹ Ministru kabineta 2018. gada 23. janvāra noteikumi Nr. 49 "Noteikumi par Latvijas zinātnes nozarēm un apakšnozarēm". <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/296661>

³⁰ International Evaluation of Scientific Institution Activity. Latvia. Methodology (September, 2020). <https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/5119/download>

key aspects to consider when moving to a new external quality evaluation procedure. or the overall model.

When looking at the quality assurance systems of other countries, it can be noted that the available information on other countries is not always comparable without further analysis, and attention should be paid to terminology. For example, the accreditation of study programmes in Austria is an ex-ante assessment that could be compared to the programme licensing procedure in Latvia, but not with the accreditation of study programmes or study fields.

There is a general tendency to move the quality assurance to the institutional level. The quality assurance procedures performed in different countries can differ significantly even and there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to the best model for quality assurance at the national level. Anyway, in order to implement cyclic institutional accreditation for HEIs in Latvia in a meaningful way, it is important to look to the practice of others.³¹

In order to get an idea of external quality assurance systems in other countries, the models of quality assurance systems in Sweden, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Hungary and Austria and their most characteristic aspects are considered.

In the **Netherlands**, the accreditation system was introduced in 2004, and until 2011 only the accreditation of study programs was organized, while after 2011 there was also a voluntary institutional audit (this option is mostly used by public higher education institutions). The purpose of the audit is to ensure that the institution's internal quality assurance system, in conjunction with the quality culture, ensures the implementation of individual visions for good education. The current program accreditation cycle is from 2017 to 2023, which means that the third evaluation cycle will end. It is planned to move to institutional accreditation in the future, emphasizing the need for a transition period to prepare comprehensively. The main reasons for the introduction of institutional accreditation are to achieve greater trust and autonomy in educational institutions.

³¹ Kažoka A., Silka J., Rauhvargers A. (2018) Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level. <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Moving-Quality-Assurance-from-Programme-to-Institutional-Level.pdf>

The following evaluation procedures can be identified through the **Hungarian** quality assurance system: institutional accreditation, accreditation of study programmes – initial, current and other forms are in the development process, accreditation of doctoral schools/study programmes – initial, routine, evaluation of professors. Consequently, it can be noted that the system as a whole is rather heavy and multi-tiered, which creates a high administrative and bureaucratic burden for all parties involved.

In the **Czech Republic**, institutional accreditation started in 2016. Study programs and institutional accreditation are organized in two ways - as external evaluation (scientific performance, research are taken into account) and audit (compliance with regulations is assessed). If serious problems are identified, consistencies are applied - in institutional accreditation - the right to self-accreditation is revoked, accreditation is revoked, in the accreditation of study programs - a ban on admitting new students is closed, closure of study program. Any study program in the Czech Republic must be accredited in order to start operating. Accreditation of programs takes place both separately by accrediting study programs and through institutional accreditation - at the same time both the institution is accredited and the right to self-accredit the implemented programs is granted. Upon passing the institutional accreditation, the institution is entitled to accredit its own study programmes. However, institutional accreditation is not mandatory, it is voluntary.

The **Swedish** quality assurance model consists of four components: institutional evaluation, evaluation of study programs (degree entitlement), evaluation of degree entitlement, thematic evaluation (focus on a specific area, peer learning approach). Only the evaluation of study programs has concrete consequences, i.e. to grant or refuse the right to award degrees. Institutional assessment is every six years. The frequency of program evaluation is determined by the government (not cyclical), for example, by stipulating that all teacher training programs will now be evaluated. It is important to note that some study programs are also assessed by the universities themselves (then their assessment is cyclical), which is linked to the concept of shared responsibility.

In **Austria**, the system consists of 4 sectors: university colleges with teacher programs, universities of applied sciences (private, with publicly funded study places), private and public universities. The institutional accreditation approach differs for private universities and public universities. Private universities go through an accreditation process, while public universities have an audit. Private and public universities are the only sector where doctoral studies take place. Each sector is governed by separate laws, and the quality assessment processes are different for each sector. There is an initial accreditation of the institution, regular and quality management system audits of the institution. There is also accreditation regulation for private universities, which govern the procedure and the criteria for the initial accreditation of a private university and its degree programmes, the procedure and criteria for the extension of the institutional accreditation, and the procedure and criteria for the programme accreditation, as well as the procedure and the criteria for changes to institutional and programme accreditation. Private universities (also colleges) have 13 criteria for the institutional initial accreditation and 12 Criteria for re-accreditation. Separate 7 criteria are provided for the accreditation of bachelor and master programmes and 6 criteria for doctoral programmes (two additional criteria are included in the research evaluation).

From the experience of other countries, it can be concluded that the quality assurance system in each country is not static and evolves over time, and is influenced by a variety of factors, such as experience, policy settings, national reforms, changes at European level or the influence of the parties involved. HEIs have to acknowledge the role and meaning of the institutional accreditation process for the benefit of the HEI. The cyclical implementation of institutional accreditation of HEIs is a joint responsibility of the ministry, education quality agencies and higher education institutions, to ensure quality higher education and should be based on a mutual trust. Furthermore, the institutional accreditation process should not be seen only as a formal process - at the same time it is also an opportunity for the university to assess its culture as an organization, organizing and leading the accreditation process for at least one year, and the opportunity to answer the question "What can we learn from it?", and such attitude towards the accreditation process can be demonstrated only by essentially mature HEIs.

When creating a new or transforming an existing quality assurance system, it is important to take into account the following factors:

- Experience of cooperation and successful communication with the parties involved in the process
- Confidence
- Higher education institution plays a key role in quality assurance
- Internal quality system and monitoring play a more important role
- More training for evaluation experts
- Greater involvement of students and staff
- Promoting the development of quality culture
- The costs must be proportionate to the results and work invested
- The administrative burden will not be significantly reduced by introducing institutional accreditation (especially for small institutions)
- Institutional accreditation also imposes new requirements on the internal management system and communication

3. A New Concept for External Evaluation

When introducing a new quality assurance model, it is important to analyze its impact on the overall system - whether each quality assurance procedure has a clear purpose, whether the procedures are mutually consistent and whether the burden is proportionate to the outcome of the procedure as a whole. In the early stages of development, systems tend to focus on program evaluation and are based on monitoring and compliance with minimum standards. Over time, systems turn to institutional focus, and support and improvement elements are introduced. There is a general pattern that programme accreditation focuses more on compliance with standards, while institutional approaches focus more on processes that need to be maintained and developed. The transition from a program-oriented to an institution-

based approach needs to be implemented in a smart way, with the gradual introduction of institutional elements. Even in countries where the institutional assessment model is the main or the only model of quality assessment, this includes an evaluation of individual programmes. For example, In Finland, institutional audit involves the evaluation of study programs` samples.³²

Evaluating the development of the Latvian quality assessment system, it can be concluded that the transition to institutional accreditation is a sequential and natural step that will promote greater autonomy and accountability of universities/colleges, and in general the system will be oriented towards continuous quality improvement. At the same time, in order to achieve this, following the conclusions already obtained from the assessment and accreditation procedures of study fields, additional support should be provided to higher education institutions / colleges. This would promote a better understanding of the quality assurance system, emphasizing not only the physical documentation, but also its practical implementation in the work of the university / college.

3.1. The Concept of Institutional Accreditation

3.1.1. The purpose of institutional accreditation

Assessment and accreditation of a higher education/college would be the main cyclical assessment procedure in which the overall performance of the institution will be assessed. In developing the institutional accreditation model, both national regulatory frameworks and ESG standards and guidelines should be taken into account.

The purpose of institutional accreditation: to support the improvement of the internal quality assurance system of higher education institutions and colleges and to promote the continuous improvement of the operation of higher education institutions and colleges

³² Kažoka, A., Silka, J., & Rauhvargers, A. (2018). Moving Quality Assurance from Programme to Institutional Level. Internationalisation of Higher Education – 4. Pieejams: <https://www.aika.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Moving-QualityAssurance-from-Programme-to-Institutional-Level.pdf>

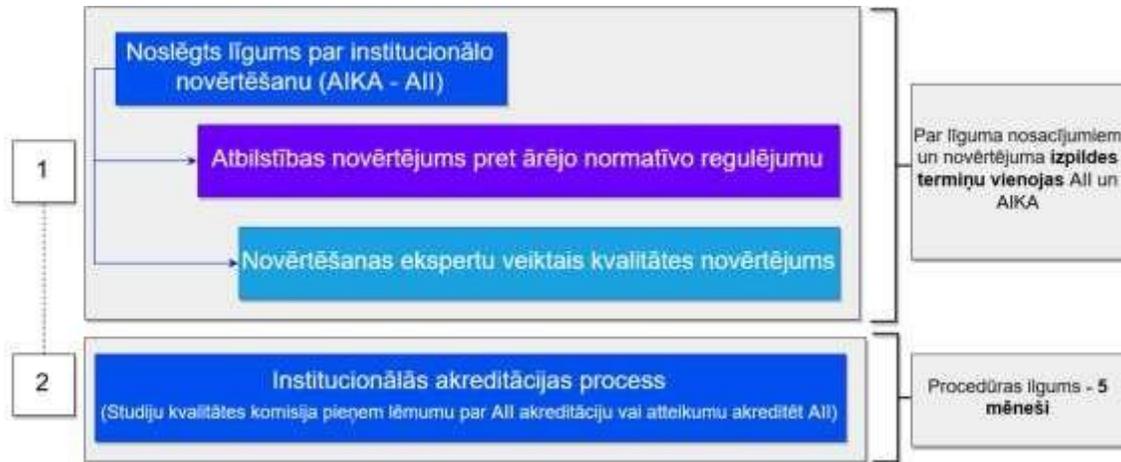
3.1.2. Institutional assessment and accreditation process

Following the approach to quality assessment developed under the Bologna Process, it is envisaged that a HEI / college will have the right to choose any agency on the EQAR register for HEI / college assessment, while accreditation or decision-making will be the responsibility of the Study Quality Commission (similar to what is currently the process of assessing and accrediting the study fields).

Institutional accreditation would include both regulatory and quality assessment. Given that the assessment of compliance with regulatory enactments requires specific knowledge of national regulations, which foreign experts usually do not have, and this assessment is technical rather than substantive, it is envisaged that it will be performed by AIKA. Thus, the requirements of national regulation will be applied equally in all cases, while evaluation experts will be able to carry out a substantive quality assessment.

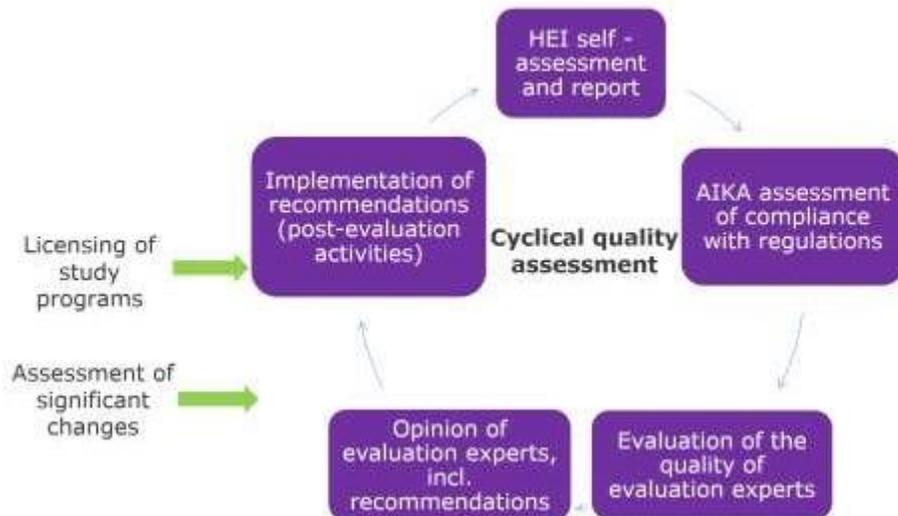
Taking into account the accumulated experience within the assessment and accreditation procedures of study fields, the benefit is observed that the assessment and accreditation procedures are separated. Moreover, after receiving the assessment report from experts, the HEIs / colleges are given additional time to get acquainted with the evaluation experts' findings, evaluate in detail the possibilities of implementing the recommendations and demonstrate the first insight into the HEI`s / college's plans for further improvement. This approach is also intended to be used in the context of institutional accreditation.

In order to ensure that the assessment process is not rushed and that evaluation experts should be able to evaluate in detail the functioning of HEI / college and to provide full and comprehensive recommendations for both the prevention and further development of shortcomings, the duration of the assessment procedure should vary from type to size for HEIs / colleges, setting a specific deadline for the completion of the assessment for the HEI / college and within the framework of the AIKA agreement (3.Picture)



3. Picture: Assessment and accreditation of HEIs / colleges

The assessment and accreditation of HEI / college would include all phases in line with the ESG guidelines and standards, which are reflected in 4. Picture showing the external quality assessment cycle.



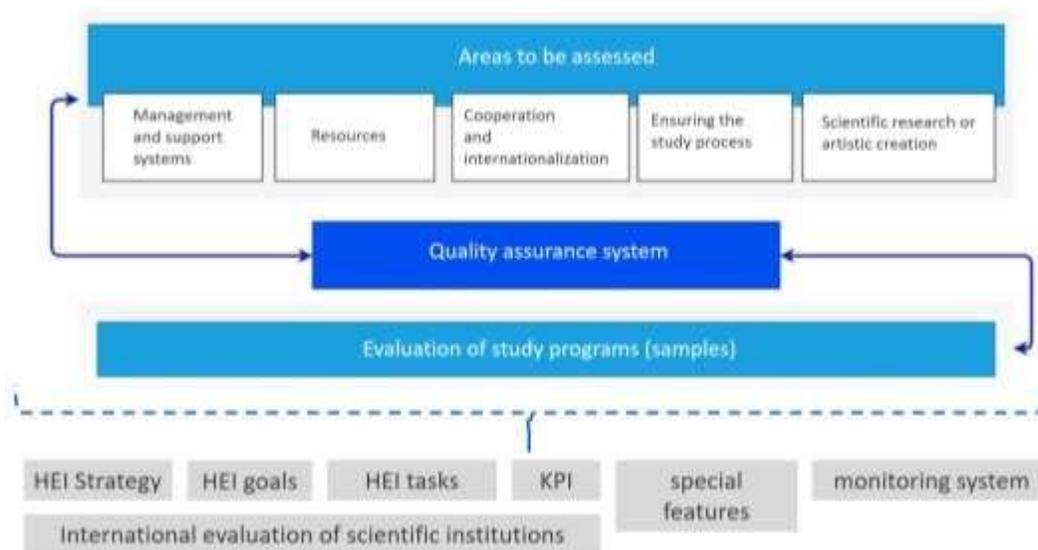
4. Picture: Cycle of external quality assessment

In order to ensure that all stakeholders have an equal understanding of the evaluation and accreditation procedure, similar to the current system, AIKA will develop methodologies and guidelines for evaluation procedures and organize informative seminars for HEIs / colleges, including ensuring that higher education institutions / colleges acquire good practice. examples from other institutions and can integrate them into their work, contributing to the improvement and performance of all universities / colleges. It is also planned to provide HEIs / colleges to obtain examples of good practice from other institutions so that they can be integrated into their work, promoting the improvement and performance of all HEIs / colleges.

3.1.3. Areas of assessment

The Law on Education³³ stipulates that the quality of education - educational process, content, environment, and management which provides everyone with inclusive education and the possibility to reach high quality results according to the objectives brought forward by the society and specified by the State. Consequently, the areas to be evaluated will be developed for the evaluation of institutions, including the aspects which are included in the definition of the quality of education in the Education Law - the educational process, the content of education, the educational environment and governance. 5. Picture demonstrates the proposal for the areas to be assessed.

³³ Education Law. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/50759>



5. Picture: Areas to be assessed in the framework of HEI / college assessment

The areas and evaluation criteria to be assessed will be developed in compliance with the regulatory framework, involving all stakeholders, respecting the standards and guidelines of the first part of the ESG, as well as taking into account the conclusions and relationship obtained after the accreditation of the study fields. In addition, aspects such as the strategic directions, objectives and tasks of HEI / college, type of HEI, data on education monitoring, international assessment of scientific institutions, as well as other indicators specific to the institution would be taken into account. At the same time, separate study programmes would be assessed to ensure quality assurance at the level of study programmes. The number of selected study programs would depend on the size of the HEI / college and the amount, scope and evaluations of the offered programs within the accreditation procedure of the study fields.

3.1.4. Assessment experts

The quality assessment will be carried out by an international expert group set up in accordance with ESG 2.4. the standard for assessment experts, which stipulates that the external quality assessment shall be performed by a group of

external experts, which includes at least one student. In turn, international (foreign) experts will be included in the expert group to give a new dimension to development and implementation of procedures.

In order to guarantee the efficiency and consistency of the experts' work productivity, the experts will be carefully selected, with the appropriate skills and competencies and excluding conflicts of interest. AIKA will develop guidelines for expert selection and work, ensuring expert independence and establishing a system that eliminates conflicts of interest. AIKA will also provide comprehensive trainings for experts, including information on the Latvian education system, the peculiarities of higher education, the specifics of the particular HEI / college and other information relevant to the assessment. The number of experts in each assessment expert group could depend on the size of the HEI / college, the diversity of study fields / programs, which will be stipulated in the methodology and guidelines developed by AIKA, thus all parties involved will be informed about a common approach to expert selection and approval.

3.1.5. Results of institutional accreditation

Regardless of which agency included in the EQAR register will carry out an assessment, in all cases the decision on HEI /college accreditation will be taken by the Study Quality Commission, thereby ensuring a common approach to the decision.

The study quality commission could take one of the following decisions:

- ✓ Accreditation for a period of **seven (7) years**, if there are no deficiencies or shortcomings have been identified in the activity HEI / college that affect quality;
- ✓ Accreditation for **three (3) years**, if such deficiencies and shortcomings in the activity of the HEI / college have been identified that do not significantly affect the quality;

- ✓ **Refusal to accredit** if deficiencies and shortcomings are identified in the activity of the HEI / college that significantly affect the quality and endanger the right of students to receive a state-recognized diploma.

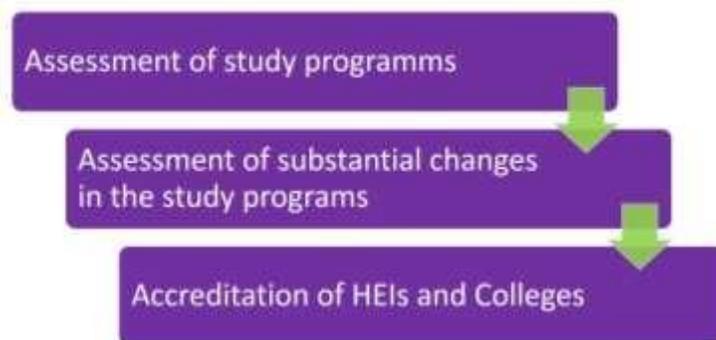
The granting of institutional accreditation means that the quality of HEIs / colleges is recognized internationally.

As a result of the accreditation of the HEI / college, the institution will be granted the right to issue a state-recognized diploma. By providing follow-up activities, the HEI / college will develop a plan and / or report on the

implementation of the AIKA recommendations in the framework of conformity assessment and the recommendations of the assessment experts` group for the improvement of HEIs or elimination of identified deficiencies.

3.2. External evaluation system following the changes

Evaluating the strengths and shortcomings of existing quality assessments, as well as listening the views of HEIs / colleges and other stakeholders, the future external quality assurance system is expected to be effective and unified, eliminating fragmentation. In total, only three types of assessment shown in 6. Picture will remain.



6. Picture: Types of external quality assessment

The licensing procedure for study programs will remain essentially unchanged and will apply to all new study programs. By licensing the study program according to uniform requirements, it will be ensured that students are admitted to the study program, which has been developed in compliance with the regulatory framework, requirements of economy and trends in the field of science. The licensing of joint study programmes a common European model for the evaluation of joint study programmes³⁴ will be taken into account.

Assessing the substantial changes in the study programme will partly replace the existing procedure for assessment of changes - assessment of significant changes in the study field.

At the same time, it will be necessary to review the conditions under which the HEI / college will be entitled to independently approve the changes, only by informing AIKA, and in which cases AIKA will involve an expert to evaluate the changes.

Assessment and accreditation of HEIs / colleges will be the only cyclical external quality assessment procedure, the concept of which has already been discussed in 3.1. section.

The following benefits of introducing a new external evaluation model can be noted:

- ✓ Less administrative and bureaucratic burden
- ✓ The regulatory framework is in order
- ✓ Avoidance of duplication and fragmentation
- ✓ Clear and comprehensible assessment procedures
- ✓ More efficient governance of HEI / college
- ✓ Greater autonomy for HEI / colleges
- ✓ Development of a quality culture is based on mutual respect and trust

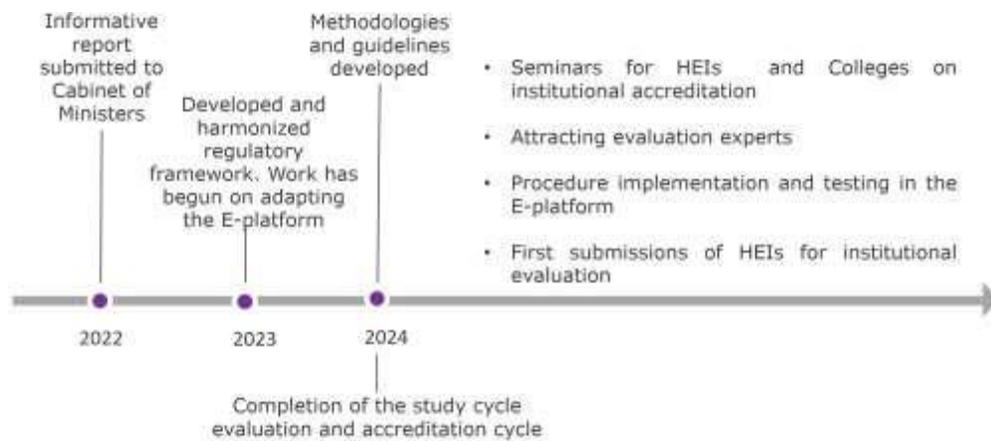
In addition, it should be noted that the beneficiaries will be both the HEIs / colleges, the quality assurance agency and other stakeholders. Quality requirements

³⁴ The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA), ko apstiprināja Boloņas procesa valstu izglītības ministri. Pieejams: https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf

and quality assessment processes will be developed through communication with stakeholders, and the results of quality assessment will be available to everyone.

3.3. Next steps

In order to implement the assessment model described above, a number of activities are required, including the development or amendment of regulations, the development of methodologies and guidelines, the organization of seminars for HEIs / colleges, the selection and training of assessment experts, and the adaptation of the AIKA e-platform to new assessment procedures. (7.Picture)



7. Picture: Next steps for implementing a new quality assessment system

Several institutions will be involved in the development of the new evaluation model according to their competencies:

Ministry of Education and Science	Development of an informative report Development and amendments of relevant regulatory enactments
AIC and AIKA	Involvement in the development of informative report Submission of proposals for amendments and development of regulatory enactments Development of assessment methodologies and guidelines Customization of E-platform Organization of seminars and trainings Attracting and selecting new experts
HEIs / colleges	Submission of proposals for amendments and development of regulatory enactments Providing proposals for the development of assessment methodologies and guidelines Participation in seminars and trainings
Students, employrs, etc.	Submission of proposals for amendments and development of regulatory enactments Providing proposals for the development of assessment methodologies and guidelines Participation in seminars and trainings Attracting new experts

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