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for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

IBAR

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IBAR PROJECT

WP 5

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National Report of Latvia

Survey of Internal Quality Assurance Systems

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Background information

One of the very first things to be done after regaining the National independency in 1991 was establishing autonomy of Higher education institutions. Along with gaining the freedom for developing of study programmes and courses and creating their syllabi, which was a great step forward towards opening the way to cooperation with Western Europe and adapting the contents of studies to the new geopolitical situation, the administrative mechanisms were lost to monitor and influence the quality of Higher Education, such as regular hospitations of lectures or strict individual plans of staff regarding teaching, research and personal development. Thus, the quality of HE was left entirely in the domain of lecturers delivering particular courses. Partly that was counterbalanced by borrowing certain elements of quality management from Western cooperation partners, e.g. through carrying out Joint European projects in Tempus programme. At the same time, the Act on Education, adopted in 1991 was looking for democratization of the education overall which in HE lead to emerging of a number of private HEIs without any previous tradition of quality control, although the law stipulated licensing as a prerequisite for admission of students and a further accreditation as a prerequisite for issuing state-recognised credentials.

In 1994 it became clear, nevertheless that both for the public (with very few exceptions) and private institutions to establish credibility to the Higher Education studies in the society at large and with the cooperation partners in Western Europe, there is a pressing need to establish a National Quality Assurance System. It was also agreed that the National Quality assurance systems will be developed in close cooperation with the Baltic neighbours – Estonia and Lithuania in order to share experiences and also to maintain the trust between the Baltic higher education systems. Latvian Quality Assurance Agency was established at the end of 1994 and a QA system was stipulated in the Law on Higher Education institutions (1995) and Regulation on accreditation HEIs (1995) which lead to first accreditation in 1996 following the nowadays typical scheme of self-assessment, international peer assessment and accreditation decision as a result. In 2001 a new Regulation on accreditation of HEIs and study programmes was adopted and in 2006 it was replaced by still another Regulation on accreditation of HEI, colleges and HE programmes, because by that time a number of colleges were declared as a type of Higher schools or part of Higher schools.

Accreditation system was (and still is) rather advanced, study programmes are assessed by foreign experts, and each study programme has undergo an accreditation every 6 years. The accreditation includes a compulsory stage of self-evaluation, and self-evaluation reports are drawn-up by chairs and departments responsible for their contents. Unlike many other countries, all accreditation results including the self assessment report and the report of the peer expert group and the decisions taken are freely accessible at the website of the Latvian QAA. However, the accreditation process as such gains very little publicity. Little publicity in matters of quality is also done by institutions or faculties; as a result of that the public discourse is mostly based on declarations made by people staying rather far from reality of academic society and having no particular criteria or information to make informed judgments. Nevertheless, the public opinion supports the necessity of closer attention to quality issues in HE and possibly revisiting the principles and procedures of accreditation. A major project has just started with the funding from ESF with the objective to shift from evaluation of each individual programme to evaluation of the whole fields of studies as well as to evaluate all the existing study programmes in Latvia and

provide recommendations to the government on their quality and relevance. The criteria for this project seem to have no reference to ESG on internal quality assurance.

Up to now the law does not put an obligation on HEIs to create specific policies for internal quality assurance or create quality management systems, and therefore HEIs are still free to choose what sort of quality management system they use and in what terms they formulate their internal policy for quality assurance. Nevertheless, there is a number of legal requirements that make the quality management unavoidable, at least down to the level of Faculties and Directors of Study programmes. Thus, each HEI has to develop a Constitution (Statute) and get it adopted by the Parliament (Universities) or at the Government (other HEIs). The Constitutions have to contain references to quality issues and to responsibilities of administrative and academic structural units, as well as representation of various stakeholders and actors (including students) in all the governing bodies. Subordinated to that act there have to be internal regulating documents that define the roles and responsibilities, as well as ways of functioning of all the bodies involved.

The law does not oblige to implement or to make a particular reference at any level to ESG, although there is a governmental recommendation to use the principles defined in ESG in accreditation process. These recommendations concern the national Quality Assurance Agency and normally are not dealt with at the stage of self-evaluation.

To study the situation with policy documents in HEI of Latvia, 4 institutions have been chosen:

1. University of Latvia is the largest HEI in Latvia it has about 19,600 students. It is a comprehensive academic and research institution, and it has study programmes and research in all the major subject areas. It has branches in several regional cities, and it has a world-wide cooperation network. Its history dates back to 1862.
2. Business school „Turība” one of the largest private institutions in Latvia. It had around 5800 students in 2010, and it has several branches in Latvian regional cities and towns. It is a vocationally oriented institution, with study programmes in just a few directions: tourism, business administration, law and public relations. It was founded in mid-nineties, but it has gained a wide recognition not only in Latvia, but also abroad due to intensive participation in student exchange.
3. Latvian Maritime Academy is a small institution (only 840 students in 2010) that focuses on training the specialists for shipping business. It has very closely ties with the respective employers and it has administratively integrated 2 vocational schools that are also preparing specialists (with secondary education) in this field.
4. Rezekne Higher School is rather small – 2250 students in 2010, but it tends to offer education in a wide spectrum of subject areas to serve the needs of Eastern region of Latvia; its students are mostly (around 60%) coming from the region, and it has a couple of branches in smaller towns of the same region.

Thus the first two are representing larger institutions while the other 2 are smaller ones; the 1st and 4th have a broad orientation of fields of studies, the 2nd and 3rd are narrowly specialized. The 2nd one is private while the rest are state established institutions. By the number of institutions we have above 10% representation, and by the number of students they represent more than 50% of the students in Latvia. This way we have a fairly good representation of all typologies present in Latvia to be in a position to generalize on all the research questions of the IBAR project.

Findings from the research questions of WP5

1. Is there an institutional quality assurance policy in place? If not, why? Does the policy at national level prescribe the creation of internal quality assurance system? Is the institutional QA policy a separate policy? What is it based upon (learning outcomes, qualification of staff, equipment)? Is there an explicit reference to ESG? To what degree it is accessible publicly? In what major EU languages is it available?

The national policy does not prescribe creation of internal quality assurance policies as the necessary elements for accreditation (which so far is alpha and omega of the quality assurance) are built in the National systems and policies. Nevertheless in all institutions a sort of internal quality assurance policy has been developed. Usually it is not a stand-alone policy but constitutes part of overall policy of development and therefore the quality assurance elements are included in a number of internal regulating documents. In some institutions (3 out of 4) there is an attempt to establish a quality assurance policy in a more focused way; it seems easier to create such a comprehensive system in smaller and more narrowly oriented institutions where all the processes are easier monitored and supervised by the central authorities. Quality policy in all the institutions is based upon the end result; it can be disputed if that is always the learning outcomes as described in Bologna documents because in Latvia only recently the concept of learning outcomes has been adopted by the Government. The policy is described in the Constitution of the institutions, in the mid-term or long term strategies, and in specific documents regulating the academic process. In smaller institutions the policy is formulated in a few points annually and adopted by Senate of the institution. All the regulating documents are available publicly at the internet sites of the institutions but normally they are not translated into foreign languages. The translated texts concern regulations on admission and the information necessary for choice of study fields.

2. How does the policy involve the organization of the quality assurance system? If yes, please describe. Who is the person responsible?

In most institutions (3 out of 4) it has been decided to create a Quality management system. In 2 of them it is based on ISO 9001:2008 standard, in one – on a standard applied in the respective branch of economy. 1 institution is discussing a possibility to create its quality assurance system for academic work along the lines of ESG, as a comprehensive QMS seems too demanding, and - for large institutions - could create too much additional bureaucracy. In smaller institutions it is under direct supervision of a vice-rector, in larger institutions there is a specific unit of internal quality management either within the academic department or separately. The quality management system describes the aims of the quality policy and all the processes of main activities. The system does not include the processes and respective units concerning maintenance of buildings, dormitory services, book-keeping. The system is not oriented towards ESG, but it includes most of its recommendations, such as developing and revision of study programmes and courses, examinations and awards, involvement of students.

3. How does the policy involve the responsibilities of departments, faculties and other organizational units?

In most institutions (3 out of 4) the responsibilities have been described in the QMS (along with the respective processes) and they include all levels from the central units down to faculties and chairs responsible for particular disciplines. The responsibilities are further confirmed in respective internal regulations (on the Academic department, on the studies, on the Promotion Council, on the Student Self-Government, on the State exam). This naturally comes with the methodology of the QMS applied. In 1 institution (where the QMS is not yet developed), the responsibilities have been described along the computerized system of study programmes and courses, and they reach down to the deans level, while the lower levels are described in the Constitution. This leaves some unclarity about responsibilities of chairs comprising sets of courses in one or several disciplines.

4. How does the policy address the involvement of students? If not, why? Is there a requirement for students to be involved in the preparation of self-evaluation reports? If yes, in what status (observer, expert, member of a governing body?) Is there a requirement for students to be involved in decision-making as an outcome of evaluation? Who selects and appoints the representatives of students?

In all the institutions students are involved in adoption of self-evaluation reports. That follows from compulsory representation of students as full members of governing bodies of faculties; this is stipulated by the Law and by Constitutions of institutions adopted by the Government or by the Parliament. In preparation of the reports students are not involved directly, but their opinions, according to the regulations governing the accreditation process, are gathered and summarized concerning the quality of the study programmes and particular courses. Students are also periodically polled by the faculty in order to gather opinions concerning the annual review of the courses, and participation of students in decision-making is again at the faculty level. It is not regulated by internal or external normative documents that students should be involved in decision making at the level of chairs or in development of particular parts of courses, and those relations are maintained in an informal way depending on the quality culture at those sites. Representation of students in governing bodies (Governing board of the Faculty or of the study programmes, Senate, Constitutional Assembly) is organized in 2 ways – either they nominate themselves or they are nominated by self-governments of Faculties, but in both cases it is the self-government that takes the decision to include particular candidates; this is described in the internal regulations of self-governments of students. Concrete cases of election or real influence of students on the course of developments has not been the subject of research at this stage and will be considered subsequently.

5. How does the policy involve specification of the relationship between teaching and research? To what extent is research considered as a quality criterion of the institution and its structural units/employees/students? Are there specific incentives (e.g. financial) to promote the importance of teaching/research quality of staff and structural units?

UL has put development into a real research university as its main objective, and this idea is maintained throughout the whole system of its internal regulations. This concerns the contents of

studies, recruitment and re-election of academic staff, basis of Bachelor and Master theses, comparison of faculties and study fields in the institutional reports. UL is also fully supportive to the idea of the government to use research performance as one of the parameters in calculation of budget allocations, and has recently introduced a system of electing the academic staff with a high record of research into positions of Senior and Lead Researchers, parallel to the position they are occupying; this in future will influence the distribution of budgetary funds for research to faculties and institutes. The other 3 institutions mention research in their policies, but with no administrative or financial implications on particular faculties or faculty members. Depending on the scope and general trend of the institution research has more or less influence on the contents of study programmes and graduation papers. RHS requires research-based Bachelor and Master thesis, BAT is requiring research for Master thesis, while LMA is strongly professionally oriented and focuses rather on practical experience of both staff and students; although the research takes place and is mentioned in its policy, there is no administrative unit to be responsible for developments into research direction and no vice-rector for research; the staff that is inclined and prepared for research activity, mostly carries out the research work in cooperation with larger institutions, e.g. Riga Technical University. In a way this is similar to the initial idea of professional HEIs in other European countries, and it can be expected that research will regain its proper importance also in professionally oriented institutions in Latvia. This idea, certainly is not unanimously accepted in the wider academic society, and there are suggestions to strongly promote research only in Science University (-ies), and to a limited extent in Regional Higher Schools while in the rest of [small and vocationally oriented] institutions focus only on the teaching and practical placements. However the Higher Schools themselves keep the Universities as the guiding posts for future developments, and recent history shows that several of them have gradually developed into the status of University already.

6. What are the ways of policy implementation, monitoring and revision? Is the implementation mainly top-down or bottom-up? Is it monitored continuously sporadically (e.g. as part of an external evaluation)?

The implementation of quality assurance policies in most institutions (3 out of 4) is distinctly top-down measure. Especially it has to be mentioned for smaller institutions with a narrow scope of studies where the central bodies are keeping their finger on all the developments. The staff has been involved in development of quality management systems in all the 3 smaller institutions, because the success of quality management is highly dependent on the participation and awareness of everybody involved in the processes; however the initiative has always come from the top – a workgroup has been established to make out proposals, these proposals are than widely circulated and discussed and then the central body takes the decisions for the next steps. The monitoring and auditing is organized centrally. A slightly different situation is seen in the largest of the 4 institutions. The policy is developed and its implementation managed centrally, but it only reaches the level of Dean's office, and without an initiative of bottom-up it would practically remain on paper. Faculties themselves have are striving to develop some quality mechanisms by means of polling of students and alumni, by establishing close contact with employers and involving then in governing bodies or examination boards, and by development high quality programmes in cooperation with partners in other Latvian or foreign institutions. To this effect one can mention Eurobachelor programme that has recently been developed by the Faculty of Chemistry or Master programme in Food Science developed by cooperation of several

faculties of UL and 2 more Latvian institutions already having its first graduates last year. What seems to be missing in all institutions is a mechanism of ensuring quality at the grass-root level and developing a proper quality culture.

7. How does the policy involve the statement regarding the collaboration with the secondary education sector?

Except for institutions that are involved in teacher training there is no specific statement about collaboration with the secondary education sector. 2 institutions collaborate with schools only by organizing certain promotion and advertising activities such as competitions in specific subjects or topics to get more applicants in their study fields or organizing publications, open door events or visits. These measures are included in plans of PR units. UL which is preparing teachers in Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Informatics, Languages and Social Sciences has elaborated strategies for cooperation with secondary schools and is influencing the contents of secondary education both through the contents and structure of teacher training programmes and by participating in development of didactical materials and text-books for schools in many disciplines; particular attention is given to interdisciplinary fields and multi-subject teachers. RA is somewhere in between, and is involved to some extent in preparation of didactic materials for schools and initial and in-service training of teachers. So part of the overall strategy of institutions deals with collaboration with the secondary schools.

Conclusions

So far there is no national policy for implementing the ESG for internal quality assurance in HEI of Latvia, except for recommendations by accreditation bodies to pay attention to the issues described in ESG when carrying out expert evaluation of study programmes or HEIs; the institutions do not make specific reference to ESG in their policies or strategies or in the self-evaluation reports. Quality issues are touched at National level in a more general way. Nevertheless, most of the principles of ESG are embedded in the institutional policies and strategies, and some institutions have started work on inscribing ESG principles into their quality management systems. So far most institutions have developed quality management systems according to ISO 9001:2008 standard or similar, and it includes processes and procedures that actually are not inconsistent with ESG. Some institutions that do not have a QMS, have nevertheless a computerized system to maintain the development and monitoring of study programmes and study courses, and the regulating documents concerning main processes, structural units and governance are very closely related to quality issues and definitions as they are used in ESG.

A typical barrier to implementation of ESG in HEI to full extent is that the central administrative bodies of institutions do not consider direct implementation of ESG an obligation and are reluctant to invest extra effort to perhaps create additional bureaucracy and extra work.

The fact that all the institutions are putting efforts to create well functioning Quality assurance systems is a good sign. Whether it is an example of good practice it will be decided after comparison with other countries and after collecting information about practical implementation of policies of internal quality assurance.