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IBAR PROJECT
WP 11

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National Report of Latvia

Quality and Information

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INTRODUCTION

National policy on information

Universities in Latvia are autonomous, but there are quite a few issues the state is trying to regulate concerning information.

The Law on HEI¹ stipulates (art.5) that HEIs “should ensure information is collected and analyzed on students’ success, employability of alumni, students’ satisfaction about the study programme, effectiveness of work of the academic staff, on available learning resources and their costs, and on essential indicators of activity of the HEI”.

The same article also prescribes that „HEIs organize their work to the interest of the society, and inform the society about their activity, about directions and opportunities of their studies and scientific research, to facilitate a choice of studies and research according to the interests and abilities of each individual. They offer scientific, artistic and professional findings, methods and results to the society”.

These statements mostly cover ESG 1.6 and 1.7 that make the scope of the current WP.

The next most significant document of the National level is The Regulation on accreditation of HEI, colleges and Study directions² that has now replaced the previous one where the emphasis of accreditation was on study programmes. Its annex 1 on self-assessment includes a requirement (art.3.3) on provision of information on mechanisms of internal quality assurance and on information systems allowing also Exchange of information through national and international networks.

Its annex 2 – on criteria of accreditation – includes internal system of quality control, adequate information systems for academic activity, as well as internal quality assurance system among the assessment criteria.

The next important document is the Statute (“Constitution”) of each HEI. According to Law it must include rules about internal decision-taking, about the internal bodies participating in preparation and taking of decisions and on tasks and activities of the institution in general. This covers academic work and research as well as student self governments. Each institution has a system of internal rules and regulations, covering also the bodies and persons concerned with the topic of present WP and an internal quality management system, in which one can trace the particular procedures concerning gathering and use of information and publicity.

Research methodology

We studied the documentation concerning information available at internet sites of institutions and also the general documentation on quality. The 4 institutions have also been visited to carry out interviews with the target groups defined by the lead partner of the WP11. Altogether we interviewed 8 persons from central management, 20 persons from mid-level management, 20 street-level teachers, and 25 students.

We also included the information on teaching staff issues received during the research for WP5 – WP10.

¹ Augstskolu likums (Law on HEI)

² Ministru kabineta noteikumi Nr.668, Rīgā 2012.gada 25.septembrī (prot. Nr.53 45.§). Augstskolu, koledžu un studiju virzīenu akreditācijas noteikumi (Regulation on accreditation of HEI and study directions)

ANSWERS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1: Is there any policy, regulations or practice at national level referring to the provision of information about HEIs and by HEIs (to society at large, various institutions, HEIs' stakeholders...)?

According to the Law HEIs implement their internal quality assurance systems within which they ensure, inter alia, that information is collected and analyzed on students' progress, employment of alumni, students' satisfaction about the study programme, effectiveness of work of the teaching staff, available learning resources and their costs, essential indicators of activity of the institution.

The law also prescribes the necessity to ensure exchange of information among all the parties concerned: to facilitate cooperation between the HEI and state and municipal institutions, the HEI annually submits a public activity report that is published in the internet as a separate document.

Information on certain aspects of ESG 1.6 and 1.7 is being submitted directly to The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), such as information about the number and qualification of staff and students, about studying opportunities and the number and characteristics of the enrolled students, the offered study courses and modules, information about study directions, distribution and use of budgeted study places, as well as the information on employment of graduates during the next three years.

All aspects of ESG 1.6 and 1.7 are more or less completely covered during the accreditation procedure. The self-evaluation report, according to the requirements include information about students' satisfaction, employability of according to data from reviews of students and employers; the report has to provide evaluation on whether the study programme and study direction takes into account the requirements of the labour market – results of the evaluation of the labour market concerning availability of jobs for the graduates of the programme, results of reviews of employers. The development plan of the direction of studies has to include the information provided by employers and professional organizations about opportunities of employment of graduates at least in a 3-year perspective. Research or artistic biographies of the staff involved in the programme have to be annexed to the self-evaluation report. Experts of the evaluation committee, according to the form included among annexes of accreditation regulation have to find out if leadership and the stakeholders of the study direction have discussed and compared tendencies of development of the recent three years concerning dynamics of graduates, employment of alumni. In a separate chapter of the report, information has to be provided on resources available for the study direction: financial resources available for implementation of the study programmes and the activities of student self-government, as well as for the scientific or creative activity of the staff, qualification and professional experience of the staff involved in the teaching, its relation to the direction of studies and the subjects taught, methodical, informative (including library resources) and material resources for the programme, as well as their relation to requirements of the specific profession. An indispensable part of the report also is the information on such aspects of ESG 1.7 as learning outcomes, qualification obtained, objectiveness of assessment of knowledge, skills and competences and its use for improvement of the academic process, methods of teaching and learning, provision of learning opportunities by means of computers, internet, multimedia, study support aspects etc.

Q2: Is there any institutional policy and practice considering *collection* and *analysis* of information connected to aspects a) – g)?

There are no separate policy documents on aspects concerning information as required in ESG 1.6 and 1.7. These aspects, however, are covered by internal and external documents regulating the activity. And the institutions collect and use the data in their regular activities.

Statute of UL stipulates that student self-government has the right to receive any information and explanations from any structural unit on issues that concern the students' interests. Similar statements are present in other statutes.

Aspects concerning dealing with information can be found at all levels of decision making. An interesting point of departure is studying the internal documents of strategic planning of the higher education institution. It provides an insight into the status quo and the wishful direction of further development reflects the points of emphasis of the development activities, which sometimes are directly connected to the institution's attitude towards dealing with the information. Thus, the Strategic plan of UL for 2010-2020 foresees to collect, systemize and publish information on results of academic activity, ensure their presence in the internet, as well as facilitate IT-literacy of the staff and ensure 24h access to databases.

Student progression is registered in the centralised management systems designed for academic purposes (LUIS in UL and UR, BATIS in BST). Here all the exams are input (normally by faculties), and depending on the local tradition, various intermediate tasks to be completed by students. The student can follow his own progression at any time and it is possible for middle level and senior authorities (according to specifically established access levels) to see data on all students of respective direction. The dean's office can get data on students of the given faculty, e.g. about how many students completed their bachelor degree out of the enrolled one, how many are continuing with master studies at the same direction, and also the profile of the student population of the faculty. The system also offers centrally designed questionnaires for students to input their level of satisfaction with the programmes and courses; these data are then used for improvement of programmes, as well as for taking decisions about the performance of teaching staff for reelection. According to the regulations, the individual data on student progression must not be available publicly.

Concerning the teaching staff, there is a data base of published papers in each institution, maintained by the library and regularly updated by each teacher and researcher. These data are publicly available and are also used for purposes of reelection of staff. According to internal regulations on recruitment of staff, each teacher undergoes a specific evaluation before elections, but these results are not collected in the automated system and only used by respective election bodies (Faculty Council Professors' Council, Senate – according to the institutional regulation).

Learning resources are taken care by faculty administration, and there is a system of registering of each piece of equipment along with its costs, physical position and the person responsible for inventory. The library resources are ordered, acquired and inventorized centrally for the whole institution, although in larger institutions (such as UL) they are kept in a number of different buildings according to their use; the system is accessible at each branch unit, so that the resources kept in a different place can be traced and ordered at any of the branches.

Employability of graduates is followed by respective faculty for 3 successive years and according to regulations it is included in the self assessment reports prepared for each study programme annually for internal revision purposes and for external evaluations. In some institutions (but not all) there is a database for alumni, but in the interviews the staff was not certain about what data can be kept there publicly available without a breach of restrictions on publicity of personal data. The majority of institutions believe that the work with the alumni still has a great deal of improvement possible, including activities that enable profiting fully from the informational feedback with own graduates. There is a suggestion that data about carriers of alumni should be taken care in a centralized way, getting them from state register of tax payments (State Revenue Service). On the other hand, data about the unemployment of alumni can be found in the State agency of employment, if they register there. One of the institutions have a good experience of cooperation with this agency and the data are used for analysis of the study programmes and making improvements. As the result, the number of unemployed graduates is decreasing.

A number of data on expenditure and performance are prepared and submitted to MoES by public institutions following the regulations on execution of the National budget. RU has key performance indicators, mostly focused on quality of teaching staff. LMA, with the longest experience in quality management has indicators oriented towards the quality of processes according to practice of ISO 9001. Other institutions similarly use various other performance indicators that are analyzed on a regular basis and, according to regulations, included in the annual public report, that each institution has to prepare and make publicly available (on its internet site).

The graduates are shown by gender, study level, funding source. Data about student profile are submitted to the Central Office of Statistics; the students and graduates are shown by gender, study level, funding source.

Q3: Is there any institutional policy and practice considering *use* of information connected to aspects a) – g)? If yes, for what *purpose* is it used (decision-making, corrective action, improvement, innovation)?

Student progression and success rates are used, as a rule, for *corrective actions, improvement*. Less frequently they are used for *decision-making*, and only occasionally for *innovation* (except BST).

Employability of graduates is used for all the 4 purposes mentioned *decision-making, corrective action, improvement, innovation*. In this aspect one can expect most *innovation* in future, by developing and strengthening the links of the institutions or faculties with the community of alumni.

Students' satisfaction with programmes is mainly being used for *corrective action, improvement*, which reflects the present state of the quality culture in institutions. Occasionally it brings about *decision-making* and *innovation*, but those are rather exceptions than a regular practice.

Effectiveness of teaching staff is used, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, for *improvement, innovation, also decision-making* (e.g. for decision to reelect or promote a particular teacher), sometimes for *corrective action*.

Profile of the student population is mostly used for *corrective actions*.

Learning resources available and their costs mostly for *decision-making*, but also for *corrective actions, improvement, innovation*.

Institution's own key performance indicators are also mostly the basis for *decision-making*, but sometimes linked to *corrective actions, improvement, innovation*.

Q4: How effective is collection, analysis and use of information within the institution? (ESG 1.6)

Good to address especially to: organisational structures; levels of responsibility; extent of formalisation in internal quality assurance processes; plans, reasons for changes and expected benefits (if relevant)

Each of the institution has own way of organizing the system of collecting, analysing and using of information, based on available preconditions of corporate and organisational culture at the institution.

Thus Rezekne Higher Education Institution, a small, public institution, has developed own overarching system for maintaining the internal quality culture. The system stipulates the main fields of quality improvement based on institutional strategy documents, defines the quality indicators for each of the field of interest, persons responsible both for achieving the indicators and for controlling the progress of achievement.

The internal quality ensurance system at the Latvian Maritime Academy corresponds to the ISO 9001:2008 standards of Quality Management System. The Business School Turiba also has a QMS based on ISO 9001. The top management of the Rezekne Higher Education Institution has considered obtaining a quality label for its own internal quality management system, however due to the high compound costs of going through the certification process have considered it to be an unprofitable administrative activity at the moment.

To go into details of examining a case of organisational structures and responsibility division at a large, public higher education institution (UL) - a great part of the aspects mentioned in ESG 1.6 (a-*student progression and success rates*; e- *profile of the student population*; partly g-*institution's own key performance indicators*)³ is in UL

³ By-law on administration of UL, adopted by Senate decision n 33, 26.11.2001

collected by Student services, as one of its tasks is ensuring and maintenance of information on students defined in legislative acts. Also its task is to provide service to students, such as information on availability and rules about grants, loans, references about the student's status, success, and assistance in solving social issues. The student services organize the enrollment in UL, prepares documentation about admittance, puts advertisements, participates in exhibitions and fairs (e.g., the annual event 'School 20xx), and other measures concerning student recruitment.

Processing of information, its analysis and use is the domain of structural units dealing with the academic process (Faculties and departments). In UL the mission of the Academic department⁴ is ensuring uniform and balanced academic activity (teaching and research) in the institution, development its policy and strategy and tactics, and planning activities towards the objectives of the institution, it is the main user of all the collected information about academic life of the institution. Along with this the academic department is working with ESG 1.6 (students' satisfaction, learning resources, and partly institution's own key performance indicators).

In smaller institutions similar units supervised by the Rector or vice-rector are performing these tasks. Faculties being rather autonomous concerning the cash flow, they pay a great deal of attention to all aspects of ESG 1.6, but especially b (*employability of graduates*) and d (*effectiveness of the teaching staff*). (As it was mentioned before, the common alumni networks and respective databases are still under development.) Departments or units of Public relations⁵ are dealing with definition and implementation of internal and external communication methods, principles, and techniques. They must ensure communication with alumni, employers, eventual applicants; they develop schemes for dissemination and delivery of information, and monitor the implementation of these schemes.

The development and maintenance of information system of UL is within the competence of the Administrative director of the institution; respective directors are also present in faculties to deal with all the administrative and financial issues. The Finance department is responsible for providing information on issues of financial management. The Department of Foreign Affairs is responsible for coordination and spreading of information about programmes, projects and agreements for international cooperation.

According to strategy of activity and development⁶ it is foreseen to work on widening the access of society to information about academic work in UL. It is noteworthy in this respect that the key tool for information is the institutional internet site. Institutions have regulations about development and maintenance of web sites of institutional and faculty level (UL)⁷. They are meant to ensure regular and up-to-date information to wider society. According to the rules the main responsibility for this task lies with the Department of Public relations. The department has the editor of the portal and news editors. The rules also define the responsibility of the Departments and faculties towards the information that is placed in on the site. Thus the Academic department provides information about studies and research, the Student service – about study process, admittance and career prospects.

Q5: What is the institutional policy and practice regarding *publication* of information connected to aspects h) – n)? What do you publish on internal level? What do you publish externally? How the HEI verifies if the expectations concerning impartiality and objectiveness of published information are fulfilled?

⁴ By-law on administration of UL, adopted by Senate decision n 33, 26.11.2001

⁵ By-law on administration of UL, adopted by Senate decision n 33, 26.11.2001

⁶ Latvijas Universitātes Darbības un attīstības ilgtermiņa stratēģija 2009. – 2015. gadam, apstiprināts ar LU 18.09.2009. rīkojumu Nr.1/248

⁷ Noteikumi par informācijas ievietošanu LU portālā un pamatstruktūrvienību mājaslapu izstrādi, apstiprināts ar LU 24.02.2010. rīkojumu Nr. 1/54

Strictly speaking, information on all the aspects pertaining to ESG 1.7 is publicly available. The main source of information is the self-evaluation report submitted to the accreditation body and published on its website. Information is also published on websites of institutions (see the previous chapter).

According to the Code of academic ethics⁸, this information has to be true and objective. That having been said, it is always questionable how concise and objective the information is and how easily it can be found. Thus UR and LMA have very wide information in their home pages, covering all the aspects pertaining to ESG 1.7. Statistical data are available in the annual public reports. In BST the most concise source is Self-assessment reports that are compiled annually about every study programme and available in the public part of the home page.

The institutions would certainly abstain from publicising their weaknesses (although SWOT analysis is a compulsory part of each self-evaluation report); also it would not contain personal information that could be disputed by persons involved. And there is only general information on the curriculum of each study programme, because course contents might be considered intellectual property of the lecturers.

Q6: What *barriers* and *effective practices* are identified as regards collection, use and publication of information in the institution? What can be done to enhance the current policy and practice in this area?

According to opinions of mid-level management and rank and file teachers, it is necessary to strengthen the feedback from students to get broader view on students' opinions concerning the curricula and quality of teaching. The level of response to formal reviews is mostly below 30% (in small institutions it is higher).

According to students' opinions students sometimes do not get enough information on follow-up measures carried out after evaluations. (This can also be written-off on the level of preparedness of students of the first years to follow some of the subjects, so that not always the faculty is in position to take the opinions at their face value. Some of the follow-up measures expected by students and alumni would have budgetary constraints.)

One of the overall weak points is rather inactive community of alumni, which is hindering efficient use of data on carriers of graduates. There is an initiative to cooperate with the state institutions that have such data in their official registers, but this practice has to be improved and expanded. Labour market in general is rather reluctant to participate in collection and analysis of the information necessary for universities.

One of the constraints that hinder the society at large getting objective and concise information about universities is the tendency of mass media to give preference to negative publicity; this is especially felt during the recession period, perhaps resulting from budgetary cuts in all public services, during which the government paid more attention to effectiveness of budget spending than to shortage of resources in higher education and research.

Automated systems present in all institutions and allowing the students and the management to follow each student's progress can be considered an example of good practice.

Another example of good practice in some institutions is analysis of data from various surveys and publishing the findings and making conclusions available to decision makers of all levels through central information system (internal part of web pages).

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CONCLUSIONS

In general, Latvian institutions are on the right track concerning work with the information. Certainly there is always room for improvement. Thus, although a lot of information is available through centrally organized system, decision-taking culture needs improvement. This can be evidenced by the fact that in

⁸ E.g., Code of academic ethics of the University of Latvia, adopted by the Senate on 27/10/2008, decision Nr. 170

each accreditation exercise certain cases are discovered of problem issues concerning the objectives of particular programmes or their link with labour market. Also the information provided to society at large would need to be more active and targeted, with a wider use of traditional information channels.