

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

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

30 August 2017

1. Background and Context

History of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Latvia

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

Establishing the current quality assurance agency

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

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

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

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

Support for establishing agency

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

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

Internationalisation of the Agency

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

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

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

AIC is applying for registration on EQAR.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

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

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

2.1 Activities of AIC within the scope of the ESG

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

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

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

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

3. The Review Process

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

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

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

3.1 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3 A Site Visit by the Review Panel

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

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

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

3.4 Preparation and completion of the final evaluation report

On the basis of the review panel's findings, the review secretary will draft the report in consultation with the review panel. The report will take into account the purpose and scope of the evaluation as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. It will also provide a clear rationale for its findings with regards to each ESG. A draft will be first submitted to the ENQA review coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity and language and it will be then submitted to AIC within 11 weeks of the site visit for comment on factual accuracy. If AIC chooses to provide a statement in reference to the draft report it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report. Thereafter the review panel will take into account the statement by AIC, finalise the document and submit it to AIC and ENQA.

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

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

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

4. Follow-up Process and Publication of the Report

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

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

5. Use of the report

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

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

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

6. Budget

AIC shall pay the following review related fees:

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

Travel and subsistence expenses follow-up visit	1,600 EUR
---	-----------

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

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

7. Indicative Schedule of the Review

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