

Mobility report

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Please provide the following information about the mobility. This document, accompanied by the proof of multiplier presentation that is to be conducted after the mobility period, should be submitted to project coordinator at goran.dakovic@enqa.eu no later than one month after the end of the mobility.

1. What were your expectations of the mobility? What did you want to learn or achieve?

The main goal was to learn in detail about the QA system in Latvia in comparison with the Czech system and to identify its main strengths and weaknesses. The face-to-face of the mobility was going to ensure not only gaining factual knowledge and data about the Latvian system but also critical reflection and a more nuanced set of information about QA. The focus was going to be, in correspondence with the challenges and goals identified in the Czech National Action Plan, the legal frameworks, external QA processes and selection and training of peer review experts. Additional ESG-related topics of interest were internal QA of the agency and thematic analysis. The mobility was aimed at finding out if any similar issues are or were faced by AIKA and how they have dealt with them. This knowledge would then inform decision-making in the Czech Republic on how to adjust the system in order to comply with the ESG. Overall, it was expected to get examples of good practice and ideas that could be directly or indirectly implemented to improve the Czech system. The historical and cultural similarity of Latvian higher education to the Czech environment supported the hopes for transferability of the experience shared during the mobility.

2. Please provide a detailed description of activities during your mobility

- Presentation: Legislative arrangements for QA and the internal regulations and organisational set-up of the agency

This session was an introductory session to become familiar with the legal basis of QA and the agency. The presentation focused on both content and form of relevant regulations including the internal regulations of the agency. The issues of independence and role of the agency within the QA system were also covered.

- Presentation: Application of four-stage method and step-by-step QA procedures (with focus on assessment of study fields)

- Observation of a site visit on the assessment of a study field
- Meeting with AIKA coordinators responsible for assessment of study fields

This set of related sessions intended to cover the study field assessment and accreditation procedures in detail. Starting with an explanation of the key steps of the process, learning was further facilitated by observation of these processes in practice during a hybrid site visit and followed by a reflection in discussion with AIKA's coordinators.

- Presentation: Licensing of study programmes
- Discussion with coordinators responsible for licensing of study programmes

This session gave an overview of another kind of external QA procedure of AIKA with main focus on the differences to study field accreditation. Discussion with coordinators was intended to provide more insight and a critical reflection of the every-day operations within this kind of procedure.

- Visit to a higher education institution (university level higher education studies) and meeting with the representatives responsible for internal and external quality assurance
- Visit to a higher education institution (college level higher education studies, short cycle programmes) and meeting with the representatives responsible for internal and external quality assurance

Meetings with HEIs' representatives aimed to complete the picture of Latvian QA system from the point of view of HEIs. The visits centred around the HEI's QA systems, the role of AIKA in supporting their development and the HEIs' reflection on the external QA procedures. The meeting at a college was also intended to showcase good practice in distance education, which has been the main orientation of this college since before the COVID pandemic.

- Presentation: Training of experts and involvement of international experts
- Observation of an expert training for assessment of a study field
- Presentation: Expert reports. Work with the Study Quality Committee

This session's main goal was to introduce AIKA's work with experts, the ways of recruitment and training with special attention to international experts. Some common challenges related to experts were also shared. Observation of an expert training showed this work in practice. Lastly, the topic covered the use of expert reports in the decision-making by the Study Quality Committee of AIKA.

- Presentation: Internal quality assurance system of the agency
- Presentation: Thematic analysis

These special sessions concentrated on demonstrating how AIKA complies with the respective ESG requirements and emphasizing the multi-layered nature of these ESG. Experience from the first external ENQA review was shared during these sessions.

- Presentation: Databases used in quality assurance processes

This session covered the information systems and databases managed by other bodies as well as the information systems and databases managed by the agency. The aim was to explain the basic logic of AIKA's databases and show their various functions for different kinds of users. The history of their development and the encountered challenges were also included.

3. To which topics/objectives of the SEQA-ESG was your need for peer support linked? Please check all that apply.

- legal frameworks in line with ESG compliance;
- alignment of the QA processes to the ESG peer-review method;
- connection of national criteria with the ESG;
- appropriate methods and criteria for the involvement of peer reviewers;
- stakeholder involvement in external QA;
- other.

- 3.1 Please elaborate on how the mobility increased your knowledge of the topic(s)/objective(s) mentioned above:

Legal frameworks in line with ESG compliance

It became clear that being a well-funded independent entity works well in AIKA's favour. The agency is authorized to collect fees for assessment and accreditation procedures. AIKA has full control over its policies related to staff and diversifies its sources of income from government funding to fees and projects. This enables forward-looking budgeting and strategic planning. AIKA is also able

to enter contracts and does so with HEIs to conduct procedures, with experts and with other institutions to participate in projects. Being a government-funded agency, AIKA regularly reports about fulfilment of its duties to the ministry for accountability purposes.

Furthermore, AIKA is not bound by the administrative procedures act and has the competence to design its own processes. AIKA also has the authority to develop standards for assessment that are used alongside a set of government-enforced criteria for higher education. Although AIKA's procedures are application-based like NAB's, the administrative procedures act applies only to the final accreditation decision and to the appeals procedure. This enables AIKA, among other things, to request HEIs to announce their intention to apply for assessment (reaccreditation) in the following year, which in turns makes it possible for AIKA to make yearly activity plans, to schedule procedures effectively and to secure the resources and capacities necessary for the upcoming procedures ahead of time. The common time frame for assessment procedures is 6 months in AIKA's case, which is more realistic for NAB than the 4 months prescribed in Czech legislation. In AIKA's case however, this timeframe does not include the decision-making of its Study Quality Committee (SQC). The timeframe is contractual for AIKA and therefore it can be adjusted according to the nature of the procedure and other relevant circumstances, whereas it is firmly included in the law for NAB.

The QA system differs from the Czech system that is based on programme and institutional accreditation. The Latvian system rests on study field accreditation and licensing of study programmes. Study field accreditation is always preceded by and based on assessment of the study field and all programmes within it. Therefore, AIKA is able to assess all programmes in study field carried out by a given HEI in a cluster through a single procedure. This approach is not only effective in terms of time and resources but also provides the opportunity to assess the programmes in relation and in comparison to one another, giving an overall picture of the state of the art in the given study field at that HEI. A disadvantage is repetitiveness of the assessment of more general standards on the institutional environment and internal quality assurance systems. If a new programme is to be launched before the time comes for reaccreditation of the study field, the HEI applies for a license. If licensed, the programme can start and will be included in the next assessment of the study field. The period for accreditation of study fields is 6 years or 2 years. HEI applies for (re)accreditation of a study field including programmes within it following its assessment and may leave out any programmes that have received a negative assessment in order to not endanger the entire study field accreditation. Such programmes must be terminated but can later be licensed if all deficiencies have been remedied. The Latvian system also includes institutional accreditation as a one-off procedure but AIKA is seeking to reform the model in the near future.

Alignment of the QA processes to the ESG peer-review method

One of the main differences between the Latvian and Czech external QA procedures are site visits. While NAB carries them out only in the institutional accreditation procedures and in external evaluation of HEIs, AIKA has integrated them into all study field assessment procedures and into licensing procedures for study programmes. Site visits for study field assessment, which forms the majority of AIKA's procedures, cover both the study field and all study programmes included within the field. The site visits last multiple days (depending largely on the number of study programmes) and include interviews with a wide variety of actors and stakeholders including the HEI management, quality team, teaching staff, employers, students, alumni etc. A tour of the premises is also a fixed component of the site visit. While the site visits are organisationally demanding and time-consuming, they are seen as an integral part of the procedure that enables verification of information provided in the application on site. In the case of AIKA, the manageability of site visits is facilitated of clustering of programmes into study fields, resulting in a single procedure. A possible challenge could be the high frequency of visits to a single HEI and the related repetitiveness of assessment of the more overarching standards (IQA system etc.) The site visits have started to be conducted as hybrid following the COVID-19 pandemic with Latvian experts and the AIKA coordinator on site and the

foreign experts online. While fully on-site visits would be ideal, hybrid visits (if well-managed in organisational and technical terms) can be more flexible and save time as well as costs. Thorough preparation of the panel members is key, they should study all materials in advance, define their respective roles for the visits and prepare questions to be asked.

Another significant element of the four-stage peer review method is reporting. AIKA places great emphasis on the quality and comprehensiveness of expert reports from assessment and licensing procedures. The reports cover all standards prescribed by the regulations. They include an assessment of criteria supported by an analysis and factual evidence for the findings. Reports are composed jointly by the entire expert panel, typically the panel members divide various parts of the report among themselves. The consistency and completeness of the report is checked by several staff members of AIKA including its director. The quality of the report is crucial because it serves as the main basis for decision-making of the Study Quality Committee (SQC) on accreditation (or license). The SQC also takes into consideration any changes and improvements made by the HEI in reaction to the panel's findings. Expert reports are published in full, which is a requirement of the ESG. The self-evaluation report of the HEI submitted as a part of the application for assessment is also published by AIKA. AIKA is registered in EQAR and therefore the reports are also submitted to the DEQAR database.

With regards to follow-up procedures, expert reports always include recommendations for improvement of the given study field and programmes. If any minor deficiencies are found, these must be corrected before the HEI applies for accreditation from the SQC. Recommendations made for the longer-term are always considered in the next assessment when the panel assesses, as a part of the assessment criteria, how the past recommendations were fulfilled.

Appropriate methods and criteria for the involvement of peer reviewers

Selection and appointment of experts is considered one of the most challenging parts of the assessment procedure for AIKA. The expert panels for study field assessment consists of a minimum of 5 experts (more if the field includes a high number of programmes), with a labour market representative and a student being always involved. They are selected by AIKA staff and confirmed by the director on the basis of their expertise and past experience with assessment. The assessed HEI may comment on the composition of the panel but AIKA has the discretion to follow or not follow the HEI's objections based on their relevancy. AIKA is free to choose experts from its database but also outside of the database, even to search for and approach new experts. The expert database serves to manage information about experts but does not restrict AIKA in selecting suitable experts.

International experts are always appointed to panels for study field assessment and adequate conditions have been created to enable their engagement. The procedure is carried out in English and language proficiency is therefore a requirement of all experts. The HEI may use translation services during the site visit but all documents submitted as a part of its application must be produced also in English. All AIKA coordinators are also fluent in English. The remuneration offered by AIKA is competitive enough to attract international experts. Procedures for licensing of new programmes involve Latvian experts only.

AIKA's training mechanism for experts consists of two activities. Firstly, general expert trainings are held from time to time to acquaint experts with the basic regulations and principles of assessment. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the trainings are held online, which makes them accessible to foreign experts. The trainings are designed to also include a practical interactive part where the experts supported by AIKA coordinators simulate panel work, site visits and analysis of applications for assessment. Undergoing such training is however not a precondition for becoming a member of a panel. Secondly, each appointed expert panel undergoes two online training sessions. The initial training serves as an introduction to the assessment processes and standards for assessment. The second session, previously conducted in-person immediately before the site visit, is an opportunity to exchange impressions on the application, to clarify the requirements on the

expert report and to prepare for the site visit. Participation in these sessions is mandatory for all experts although the initial session can be waived for very experienced experts. While this training mechanism is time-demanding, AIKA sees it as necessary to ensure the quality of expert work and the integrity of procedures.

Other

With respect to ESG 3.6 on internal quality assurance of the agency, AIKA has made sure that all the subparts of the standard and guidelines are met. This approach of breaking down the standard and interpreting each subpart has proven to be very effective. AIKA has developed a quality manual to guide staff members in coordinating the procedures and adopted a code of ethics. A mentorship mechanism helps the smooth and quick adaptation of new employees as AIKA has a frequent turnover of coordinators. A monitoring system to keep track of progress in each procedure and to manage the workload of individual coordinators has been implemented. Another element that helps ensure quality is the multi-stage feedback from AIKA staff both to HEIs on their submitted applications and to expert panels on their draft reports. Although it is, again, time-consuming for AIKA staff, it is considered to greatly contribute to the quality and consistency of the documents but also to provide feedback to the coordinators on their initial check of the documents. Overall, AIKA has developed its IQA system with a clear purpose and with confidence that all its steps contribute to the quality of its work.

For ESG 3.4 thematic analysis, AIKA has approached its first review of compliance with the ESG with a clear plan to carry out thematic analysis. The main component has been analysis of results of assessment and accreditation procedures. AIKA has started to create analyses of individual study fields. With 32 study fields, it seems a big task but the methodology has already been laid down and the functions of AIKA's database greatly supports the conduct of thematic analysis. Moreover, AIKA has taken on smaller thematic analysis projects, typically running a thematic survey and the analysing its results. One of the preconditions for thematic analysis seems to be careful planning of the activities and of the required staff capacities. Great emphasis is placed on dissemination of the findings, making sure that AIKA's efforts are used by HEIs and make impact on higher education. Dissemination is done through the website, press releases, publications, mailing lists, seminars etc.

AIKA's activities are supported by its e-platform (database). It serves to manage procedures and has interfaces for HEIs as well as for experts. It also enables generating information from all procedures by study field or by standard, which is extremely helpful for thematic analysis. The e-platform is also used to generate basic statistics for AIKA's website. Last but not least, the database keeps personal information on the experts. The database is also connected to DEQAR. The developing of the database was a long and demanding process for AIKA but the result is immensely helpful for the agency.

4. How has/will the mobility impact(ed) the implementation of the national action plan/agency review action plan?

The mobility has provided many ideas and good practice examples to support the implementation of the national action plan. The programme of the mobility was specifically targeted at the main priority areas related to compliance with the ESG of NAB. In the area of legal frameworks, the mobility enabled comparing and contrasting the structures of legal frameworks for QA. This was important in order to identify what legal provisions are necessary to allow full implementation of the ESG. It was discovered through the mobility that AIKA does not face the same challenges in legal provisions that were identified in the national action plan for the Czech Republic. This finding provides additional support for the intention to remove them.

In the area of QA processes, the mobility showed possible ways of implementing the ESG after legislative barriers are removed in the Czech Republic. More specifically, the experience of AIKA with producing and publishing peer review expert reports as well as with site visits will inform and

shape the developing of these processes in the Czech Republic. Different options will be elaborated and considered with a deeper insight into the benefits but also challenges of the respective solutions. Thus, the opportunity to learn practical lessons through the mobility should help NAB avoid “beginner mistakes” and develop effective and fit-for-purpose processes.

Another area in which the mobility was very informative and provided a lot of useful ideas was the peer review experts. AIKA has a robust training mechanism and its elements could improve the work with experts in the Czech Republic. As it is one of NAB’s aims to involve international experts in the future, it will be very beneficial to utilize good practice from AIKA regarding technical, organizational and language aspects of their engagement in panels.

The abovementioned issues will also be reflected in the future agency review action plan with an outline of more specific steps to tackle the major obstacles of compliance with the ESG. In addition, the topics of internal quality assurance of the agency and thematic analysis as requirements of the ESG are of particular interest to NAB. The mobility covered both topics and provided examples and tips on how to tackle them. AIKA demonstrated a comprehensive and structured approach to internal quality assurance, which will be very useful for NAB’s review action plan. AIKA also showed their strategy for thematic analysis that will be a helpful input for creating NAB’s strategy.

5. What was your overall experience of the quality of the mobility offered? Please select one of the below options.

- excellent;
 good;
 sufficient;
 poor;
 very poor.

5.1 Please elaborate on your answer. What was (excellent, good, sufficient, poor, very poor) about the mobility? Were your expectations on the knowledge shared met?

The mobility was excellently prepared and conducted on the part of the hosting agency. AIKA drafted a detailed programme of the mobility week and consulted it beforehand. The staff gave a lot of thought to support learning through various methods (presentations, group discussions, visits to HEIs, observation of procedures). During the visit, responsibilities were clearly divided among the involved staff and they were fully committed to the programme. They were also very open about the strengths and weaknesses of AIKA, invited my reflections on their QA system and showed interest in learning about the differences between the two national systems. AIKA also took extra steps to make me feel welcome and at home at the agency, including a gathering outside the working hours which strengthened the personal relationships.

My expectations were fully met with all the pre-agreed topics being covered in much detail. The length of the mobility (full week) contributed to the extent of knowledge gained because it truly requires a lot of time to understand a system. As the week passed, the gathered information started to come together more and more to create a full picture. The fact that AIKA regularly involves international experts become advantageous because many resources were available in English.

6. How have you disseminated the learning outcomes of the staff mobility within your organisation?

The knowledge gathered through the mobility was disseminated among NAB staff members via a presentation session on 23 March. The session lasted around 90 minutes and a powerpoint presentation was shown with accompanying commentary, giving a comprehensive account of the Latvian external quality assurance system and the role of AIKA. All of the mobility topics were covered in this session. Particular attention was paid to comparison with the Czech system, pointing to similarities and differences wherever relevant. The presentation also emphasized the good practice transferrable to the NAB's activities in the short term or the long term. The session was conceived as interactive so staff members were able to ask questions, discuss the new information and exchange their views and ideas.

A mobility report was composed and submitted to the presidium of NAB (chair and vice-chairs) on 28 March. The report covered the main topics of the mobility: legal frameworks in line with ESG compliance, alignment of the QA processes to the ESG peer-review method and appropriate methods and criteria for the involvement of peer reviewers. Emphasis was again placed on the areas where improvement towards the ESG can be made using the lessons learned at AIKA. The report explained the main features of the Latvian system and described AIKA's quality assurance activities in detail. The report and the mobility were further discussed as an agenda item at the presidium's meeting on 6 April with special attention to the issue of independence.

The Board of NAB will also be informed about the main outcomes of the mobility at its next meeting on 20-21 April in the form of a presentation given by the mobile staff member.

Attachments:

Multiplier presentation (.ppt)

Photos from multiplier presentation

Mobility summary report (.pdf)

7. How could the mobility and the learning experience have been improved (relevant for possible SEQA-ESG2 project)?

In fact, there are no specific recommendations for improvement directly related to this mobility. As far as general observations, preparation and planning both on the side of the mobile staff member and the hosting agency are key. The mobile staff member should familiarize themselves with the available documents of the hosting agency in advance and also allow sufficient time to process, organize and disseminate the outcomes of the mobility back home. The hosting agency should thoroughly plan the agenda of the mobility with attention to logical sequence of sessions and sufficient time for discussion and reflection. The mobility can be very demanding on the host agency's capacities so any commitments should be planned carefully and coordinated with any other local commitments and/or deadlines. A wider range of activities, such as observation of actual processes taking place and visits to HEIs add great value to the mobility as they enable "connecting the dots" and making greater sense of the gained knowledge. A de-briefing or wrap-up session at the end of the mobility to exchange overall impressions is also highly recommended. Perhaps these tips could be compiled into a guideline document for future staff mobilities.



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