

## **Synergies between higher education monitoring and quality assurance: national perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*The article looks at the concept of “monitoring” in higher education. The author describes the national higher education approaches to monitoring and analyses the role of the national quality assurance agencies in it with detailed examples of the three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Specifically, the article explores the different systems for data collection and monitoring and also the impact of these systems on the quality assurance procedures. The author provides policy recommendations on how to collect and use the available data effectively. The article gives an insight in how to create a national framework for informed decision-making in higher education with the help of quality assurance agency and without affecting its autonomy. The article is based on the research and analyses performed for establishing the national higher education quality monitoring system in Latvia.*

**Keywords:** *monitoring, quality assurance, statistics, impact, informed decision-making*

## 1. General context

Since 1999 when the Bologna Declaration was signed the three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania countries took various steps in implementing the Bologna principles in order to become recognised and attractive members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

For many of the countries that had regained independence or faced radical changes in the political and governance system in 1990s (including Latvia) another milestone was becoming a member of the European Union which provided access to massive project funding opportunities in the form of the operational programmes of the European Social Fund.

Curaj describes a similar situation in an analysis about changes to Romanian higher education (Curaj, et al., 2015). This is similar to the Latvian context when Latvia became a member of the European Union. Many of the projects implemented immediately after 2004 provided evidence based policy options and created an environment for debate with stakeholders, international experts, and decision makers and also offered different perspectives on the future of the Latvian higher education.

With the changes that came with further integration into the EHEA one of the most challenging issues has been the strategic management of the higher education system as a whole and evidence-based decision-making. The OECD has formulated several recommendations (OECD, 2008) for future policy development in higher (tertiary) education. These recommendations include the need to establish strategic aims, strengthen capacity in data collection and analysis, as well as the implementation of policy experimentation and policy analysis.

One of the problems with implementing strategic management is the lack of valid, standardized, and comprehensive data that would enable policy makers and stakeholders to obtain multidimensional and comparative information based on different aspects of higher education. This is true for many national contexts. For example, in Romania there is no integrated information system that can generate a unitary data collection process for producing useful data upon which to base higher education policies (Ciolan, et al., 2015). There are several reporting and data collection exercises that only produce the same type of data presented in different formats. Another common feature in national contexts with historically strong reporting traditions is that data are collected but not necessarily analysed and in certain cases these data are irrelevant to decision making (Ciolan, et al., 2015).

Between 2012 and 2014 the Romanian Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) implemented a project with the aim to increase the capacity for evidence-based policy making in higher education by designing a Strategic Information System for Higher Education which would include the development of an integrated online system for collecting and structuring data (UEFISCDI, 2012). Ciolan et al. point out that in the Romanian context the external quality assurance performed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) can be considered as a transparency tool with both objective data (measurable performance indicators) and subjective data (the results of peer review evaluations) because of the self-evaluation reports and the data submitted to ARACIS by higher education institutions.

The Latvian higher education system is currently in the process of defining and designing a higher education monitoring system for evidence-based policy making and placing the role of the higher education quality assurance agency within the system.

The existence of a single or integrated on-line higher education information system that is publicly available and supports data analysis should increase both transparency and data reliability as well as reduce the strain on higher education institutions and other information providers. The data collected and used by the quality assurance agency should be integrated into and support the common goals of the system.

At the same time, collecting quantitative information on the higher education system should not be a goal in itself. Sadlak (2003) points out that for a valid use of the indicators, it is necessary to know what the indicator is intended to measure and how the score on one indicator may be related to the scores of other indicators and there is always a risk that indicators may not represent the most important issues because they neither reflect the processes nor the operations that they are attempting to describe.

## **2. Methodology**

To set up the structural framework for this research author analysed the meaning of the term “monitoring” in higher education and the use of it.

For defining quality and monitoring in higher education the author used the results of interviews conducted with the aim of establishing a national higher education quality monitoring system in Latvia.<sup>1</sup>

In order to analyse the national concept of higher education “monitoring” and the role of quality assurance, the author performed two sets of structured interviews. The first and main set of interviews aimed to identify what higher education monitoring means in the national context and how is it practically implemented (including the role of the national quality assurance agency in it)<sup>2</sup>. The aim of the other (additional) set of interviews was to explore how quality assurance agencies understand quality monitoring and what their tasks and responsibilities are in relation to quality monitoring.

The results of these structured interviews were considered as an additional source to complement and support the publicly available information on the homepages of the quality assurance agencies, homepage of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the homepage of European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and also issues discussed within the community of quality assurance agencies.

In both cases the respondents were representatives of quality assurance agencies or individuals who have been extensively involved in quality assurance activities in the national context (also on the policy level).

Both templates for structured interviews were distributed electronically to recipients identified in advance and were filled in electronically. If necessary, additional clarifications were requested to respondents either in writing or in person.

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<sup>1</sup> Set of interviews with the representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, Quality Agency for Higher Education, Student Union of Latvia and 15 higher education institutions (financed by the European Social funds project Support for Meeting the Requirements Set for EQAR Agency No. 8.2.4.0/15/I/001)

<sup>2</sup> Questions of the structured interview are available in Annex 1

The survey about general concept of higher education monitoring in the national context and the survey about quality monitoring from the point of view of quality assurance agencies was distributed to the representatives of the following countries - Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Romania, and Slovenia.

Additionally, information about the general concept of higher education monitoring in Armenia, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland was analysed.

The countries for both exercises were selected in order to achieve a good balance of geographical and regional factors and to cover different external quality assurance systems. The information received was used for formulating general conclusions but it was decided to focus on and extensively describe the cases of the three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

### **3. The concept of quality monitoring in higher education – theoretical considerations and interpretations**

Quality in higher education is a challenging concept and there is no unified definition that would cover all the aspects. For the purpose of this article the author will use the conceptualizations of quality by Schindler et al. – quality as purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable (Schindler, et al., 2015). According to Schindler et al. (2015) each of these quality concepts can be characterised by quality indicators that could be in turn used to assess the notion of quality itself. Based on this as well as the interviews conducted with higher education institutions and stakeholders in Latvia the proposed definition of quality is:

*Quality higher education ensures the development of human capital by educating graduates who are capable of action and comply with the rules of society. The knowledge, skills, and competences achieved by the graduates maximise their potential and opportunities in the labour market. Quality higher education is ensured by scientifically active and mobile academic staff in a learning environment that supports the aims of the study programme and where the constant development of the knowledge base is promoted and appropriate teaching methods are applied.*

Monitoring is defined as the specific process of keeping quality activities under review or as a generic term covering all forms of internal and external quality assurance and improvement processes including audits, assessments, accreditation and external examinations and highlights the differences between external quality monitoring and internal quality monitoring (Harvey, 2004; Harvey and Knight, 1996).

When defining indicators for monitoring higher education (and quality in higher education), several issues should be taken into account – indicators should measure the phenomenon to which they refer, be easy to understand, be relevant, be strategic, and be quantitative. Furthermore, the data underlying the indicator scores should be reliable and indicators should produce information that is up-to-date with the procedures for collecting data and calculating indicators must be feasible and used in isolation (Yonezawa & Kaiser, 2003). Performance indicators and strategic indicators should also be distinguished from one another. Performance indicators are a measure of an aspect of an activity of a higher education institution (Cave, et al., 1997) with strategic indicators focusing more on the core goals established for the system.

For discussing quality monitoring in the framework of this research – three viewpoints should be considered – those of people within higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and in the government sector (the Ministry of Education in Science or an equivalent).

#### *Higher education institutions*

The main source that sets general principles for internal and external quality assurance in the EHEA are the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) which were drafted by the major European level stakeholders in higher education and first adopted in 2005 by the EHEA ministers of education.

ESG defines monitoring as a tool for higher education institutions to ensure that the study programmes achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society (ESG, 2015). ESG also suggests that all the information collected by higher education institutions should be analysed and used for development. External quality assurance, on the other hand, should ensure that the mechanisms for internal quality assurance are in place and fully implemented. There should be also external criteria to assess whether the higher education institutions monitor their educational offer and address the needs of the wider society.

#### *Quality assurance agencies*

When surveying the quality assurance agencies, monitoring from their viewpoint was mostly understood in three ways – monitoring of the results of quality assurance procedures that they perform, preparing summary results about the general findings and trends (ensuring compliance with ESG standard 3.4 “Thematic analysis”) as well as introducing follow-up procedures (following the implementation of recommendations of external experts).

#### *Governments*

From the point of view of the government, higher education monitoring should serve as a tool for defining and justifying policy actions. In order to do so there should be clarity on the objectives and purpose of monitoring – is it for the quality of education or is it for the implementation of a strategy and policy? If the aim is to monitor the quality of education there should be clarity on several issues – what are the indicators used in monitoring, whether and how do they differ from the ones used by quality assurance agencies and, most importantly, what is the national concept of quality in higher education? In countries where education receives a share of public funding there is an increasing trend to scrutinise and justify public expenditure. In the Lithuanian context, the Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA) that monitors higher education and provides recommendations to the government, speaks about accountability and the assessment of performance outcomes, measuring effectiveness and efficiency, and calculating returns on higher education (MOSTA, 2015). It claims that higher education efficiency is all about inputs and outputs – how much the state invests and how much the state gets back – and points out that effectiveness can only be measured when there is a clear understanding of which objectives need to be achieved through efficiency in higher education.

#### **4. Setting the scene: correlation between higher education monitoring and quality assurance**

There are three main types of external quality assurance in Europe – evaluation processes (enhancement-oriented), accreditation processes (oriented towards checking compliance with a certain standard) and audits (assessments of internal quality assurance systems in institutions). The two most common purposes of quality assurance are accountability and enhancement. Most quality assurance procedures try to accommodate them both. One of the

tasks of quality assurance agencies is to provide reliable and transparent information on the quality of higher education in their specific contexts.

ESG serves as the reference tool for the activities of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA. Standard 3.3 of the ESG states that quality assurance agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations should be free from third party influence (ESG, 2015). Organisational and operational independence from third parties such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder institutions is emphasised.

In 2012 ENQA performed an analysis of quality assurance procedures in the EHEA and found out that the external quality assurance procedures are mostly focused at the level of study programmes but there is an increasing trend in moving towards audits and institutional evaluations (Grifoll, et al., 2012). The comparative assessment of external quality assurance systems by Wächter et al. revealed that the quality criteria applied in programme and institutional assessments are similar – with more content-related indicators in programme assessments and a systemic approach and focus on internal quality management structures in the institutional assessments (Wächter, et al., 2015).

In the majority of European countries there is a single quality assurance agency. In 2012 a single quality assurance agency existed in 18 out of 29 systems in the European Union (Wächter, et al., 2015). In many of those countries the national quality assurance agency was established as a step in implementing the Bologna process (EACEA, 2012).

The added value of still having a single national (or regional) entity for quality assurance is the national knowledge base on higher education that is kept in one organisation and thus increases the credibility when analysing data, drawing conclusions and prognoses on higher education. However, as Bischof et al indicate, the ambition of national governments to maintain control over their national systems is one of the main barriers for establishing a European “quality assurance market” (quality assurance across the borders). This is particularly a characteristic of countries where the assessment outcome has consequences relating to the power to operate and award degrees and for the funding of programmes or institutions (Bischof et al. 2014; Wächter et al., 2015). This is true for most of the European countries. According to the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2012 in 15 out of 27 Bologna countries the outcome of quality assessments has had an impact on funding (EACEA, 2012).

The challenge of the quality assurance agencies is to demonstrate what the impact of their quality assurance methods are. While there is a European-level agreement on the standards and guidelines for quality assurance there is no single set of indicators for quality and the choice of indicators/issues to be assessed and monitored. To a large extent, this is a political decision and the indicators are sensitive to the structure of national higher education system. This means that the authority of quality assurance agencies is dependent on the national context and as such either empowered or weakened – this authority could also be maintained by supporting the indicators used and providing reliable sources for data on higher education.

When asked about the use of the term – higher education “monitoring” – most of the representatives of the quality assurance agencies replied that the concept is either not used or used rather generally. For example, in Norway the term “compiling” data and statistics is used more frequently.

In all of the countries surveyed, there is a national system for collecting data in higher education and the higher education institutions are responsible for reporting their data (in several cases even obliged to by law).

In most of the countries surveyed the system is public. It can be fully public, public to some extent or available to the registered users only. In countries where the system is fully public, it is available in the form of an interactive portal with the possibility to compare data by choosing specific indicators. There are also public annual reports but in most cases in the national language only.

The function of the general monitoring and the responsibility for maintaining the monitoring system in most cases lies on the Ministry of Education itself or on a separate institution that has been appointed/established by the ministry (the Centre of Information Technologies in Education in Lithuania or the Centre for Research Data in Norway). However, there are also cases of other institutions being in charge (State Statistical Office in Armenia).

The data are collected on various levels – at the level of individuals (students, academic staff members) or at the level of the assessment unit (study programme, higher education institution). The data collected include – data on applicants to degree programmes on participants and graduates of lifelong learning (personal identification numbers, nationality, permanent residence status, the previous education attainment of applicants to particular degree programme), data on students (age, gender, marital status, nationality, student numbers, exams), data on the staff in higher education institutions and their remuneration (categorised by job classification, gender, nationality and budget structure by particular part of the higher education institution), data on internationalisation (exchange students, students with foreign citizenship), annual reports and audit reports, financing (accounting, budgets).

From the surveyed countries, only the Lithuanian and Norwegian national quality agencies are asked to submit data - on the accreditation of programmes of study and higher education institutions or any changes in the provision (name changes or additional campuses).

When asked whether the data collected on the national data monitoring system are somehow related to the higher education quality indicators from the perspective of the quality assurance agency, the replies were varied.

In the case of the Czech Republic the only kind of data that could possibly be related to quality indicators are those on the employability of graduates. However, the monitoring report from the national system is not used by the quality assurance agency as such. In the case of Estonia, the data are used, for example, in determining the trends of international students during the institutional accreditation.

In Finland, when performing audits of the quality systems of higher education institutions, the institutions are asked to provide key statistical data. Currently they are asked to provide the number of students and staff at the institutional level and for every degree programme - the total student intake, the number of degrees completed, the average time for degree completion, statistics on international degree students and exchange students (exchange periods of more than three months). In the revised audit concept, institutions will be asked to provide their statistical data on the number of graduates as well as their student's progress in studies (covering the past five years).



In Norway the data collected on the national system are to a large extent related to the indicators used in quality assurance. The Norwegian agency looks at reporting on the academic environment, for instance whether there is enough academic staff and whether the staff includes the minimum number of associate professors or docents, also the number of students per academic staff, completion rates, drop-out rates, and research production. However, the representatives also note that they are careful with not taking all these data at face-value, as some are less reliable than others.

As a general conclusion from the survey of representatives of quality assurance agencies and the publicly available information, the agencies rarely use the national data monitoring systems even when there is such system in place. The agencies in most cases do not report to the national monitoring system and also when it comes to the use of the data available on the national monitoring system, they are mostly used for obtaining background data for quality assurance procedures that are not used directly in the procedures.

The actions of the general monitoring of higher education exist in parallel to the activities of the quality assurance agency and the decisions and policy initiatives do not necessarily have any relation to one another.

In practice, this means that there are several separately designed systems for collecting data on different education matters (general information and information specifically for quality assurance), several reports (also statistical) required from higher education institutions. There is also information that the institutions submit to several organisations (the Ministry of Education and Science, quality assurance agencies, and national education monitoring (or general monitoring) authorities) As such there are many overlaps, and the use of resources is not efficient with the design of separate IT systems complicating the overall management and decreasing the possibility of transferring data from one system to another without additional complications.

The annual meeting of Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA) in 2017 showed that there is a growing tendency for quality assurance agencies to develop online tools both for managing quality assurance procedures and also for collecting and analysing the data necessary for performing quality assurance procedures. There is on-going process of designing such tools in Latvia and Croatia. In the agencies where there are such tools they are mostly designed for internal use and accessible internally, for example, in AQ Austria (Austria) or ASIIN (Germany).

## **5. Monitoring and quality assurance: country comparison and the case of Baltic countries**

### **5.1. Lithuania**

In the Lithuanian context the data about higher education are provided by the Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA). MOSTA is a limited liability public legal entity founded and owned by the state. MOSTA organises and carries out analyses and monitoring of research in the entire higher education system. The tasks performed by MOSTA include monitoring, assessment, performing analyses of how programmes are implemented, providing recommendations, the development of strategic insights, preparation, and the publication of their annual report (MOSTA, 2017). Their data monitoring is not available in a dynamic open system and data are compiled in the form of different reports that are mostly available only in Lithuanian.



Among other tasks, MOSTA also monitors the state of play of learning resources held by higher education institutions and their compliance with the baseline requirements. MOSTA's methodology for evaluating learning resources of higher education institutions is approved by ministerial directives.<sup>3</sup> They compile a report and provide it to the SKVC and the SKVC uses it for institutional reviews as one source of information, alongside the self-evaluation report. Until autumn 2014, MOSTA used to present its decisions on the compliance of learning resources to the baseline requirements. A negative evaluation of learning resources by MOSTA would lead to a negative evaluation of the entire performance of a university or college of higher education. According to the methodology of the SKVC, institutions are assessed in four areas – strategic management, academic studies and life-long learning, research and/or artistic activities, and the impact on regional and national development. Between 2011 and November 2014 there were two higher education institutions that received a negative assessment following the negative evaluation of learning resources.

In 2014, following a court case where the higher education institution had lodged complaints against the legality of negative decision made on the basis of evaluation of learning resources, the Government's resolution was amended and evaluation of learning resources conducted by MOSTA do not have direct impact on accreditation decisions.

In 2012, during the external review of SKVC by the ENQA, the experts assessed its compliance with the ESG standard 3.7 (external quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies) as substantially compliant due to the lack of clarity regarding the role of MOSTA in the overall assessment criteria and process.

In the self-evaluation report prepared for the ENQA review in 2017, the SKVC had mentioned that a revision of the Governmental Resolution on the Procedure of Institutional Review had been started at the end of 2013. As a result, the role of MOSTA was revised. Following suggestions from the SKVC and representatives of HEIs, and as also agreed by the Ministry of Education and Science, MOSTA will produce the data that will be used as an additional source of information both for HEIs and experts, but not as single decisive factor towards the final review outcome. The final decision of evaluation and accreditation will rest only with SKVC. A relevant amendment on the Governmental Resolution regarding the institutional review procedure was made and came into force on June 20, 2014 (SKVC, 2016).

The expert team assessing the SKVC in 2017 commended the changes done and admitted that the revised role of MOSTA has changed SKVC's relationship with MOSTA considerably and that the expert teams make good use of the data provided by MOSTA and recommended that beyond this, MOSTA should have no further involvement in external evaluations (ENQA, 2017).

The SKVC and MOSTA cooperate on an everyday basis but the two institutions exist completely autonomously to one another. Representatives of MOSTA are not included in any governance or advisory structures of the SKVC and vice versa.

The SKVC as a quality assurance agency was established in 1995. In Lithuania it performs three quality assurance procedures – accreditation of study programmes, accreditation of higher education institutions and evaluation to determine HEI's eligibility to offer higher education.

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<sup>3</sup> Methodology for MOSTA reports <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.BA58DEFD9A3E/jnURRdcyNf> (available only in Lithuanian)

From the perspective of the SKVC, quality monitoring is performed by analysing the results of reviews. In 2016 the SKVC has published an analysis of the first cycle of institutional reviews (SKVC, 2015) where the assessment reports and results were analysed. The SKVC also used to produce overviews of study fields after a certain number of study programmes in the field was evaluated, now this type of reports is discontinued and the last reports were published in 2016 (SKVC, 2017)

When performing some kind of analyses, the SKVC abstains from gathering additional information from higher education institutions in order not to overburden them. The analyses are based either on already available external evaluation results (meta-analyses of data is performed) or by using sources that do not require additional input from higher education institutions, for example, analysis of their websites. In case the SKVC gathers additional data, those would mainly be in the form of feedback questionnaires, for example, after the review process is concluded. The only exception so far has been the analysis of the first cycle of institutional evaluations where the questionnaire was compiled specifically to understand and assess the impact of institutional evaluation.

In 2012 during ENQA review the experts formulated a recommendation that the summary reports should be produced more systematically and based on the stakeholder needs. The reports should have a clear focus rather than be a part of annual reporting cycle (ENQA, 2012). In 2017 when demonstrating compliance with ESG standard 3.4. the SKVC admitted that thematic analyses of evaluation findings has been one of the SKVC's weaknesses and more attention was paid to this after the external review in 2012. Annual SKVC activity reports include summarised information about the positive features, problematic issues, and trends in the programmes evaluated. The SKVC also publishes thematic analyses, the themes are discussed and chosen internally in the SKVC based on trends, topical issues that are relevant to a wider range of institutions. In 2015 the SKVC has prepared and translated in English a number of review surveys. (SKVC, 2017)

The ENQA review panel in 2017 still suggests establishing a well-defined structured process for the production and identification of topics and creating a template for reporting. The review panel noted that according to its mission and strategy the SKVC aims to contribute to the enhancement of higher education quality and commends sharing best practice in internal quality assurance as one of the ways to obtain this goal. Nevertheless, the panel suggests that the choices of thematic analysis should be made explicit, and students, higher education institutions, and the general public should be consulted and more involved when choosing them.

## **5.2. Estonia**

The main system for information on higher education is the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS)<sup>4</sup> that was established in 2005 although the registry of higher education had existed already since 1998. The registry is based on modules, and there are modules for enrolment, educational institutions, teaching staff, curricular modules etc.

All data available in the system are from the primary source and the system can only accessed by identification card (ID). In addition, only members of the EHIS can request personal data and can only receive data in three blocks – general personal data, data on studies, and data on working as a teacher/academic.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.ehis.ee](http://www.ehis.ee)

EHIS operates with the help of a data exchange layer, X-Road, which allows secure data exchange between state information systems and ensures access to the data that are maintained and processed in state databases.

EHIS data are used by all of the other institutions connected on X-Road, by the National Statistics Office, and there is a specifically designed public environment for decision makers containing both statistics and data on effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> There are annual reports published in Estonian.

There is also a second data platform used in higher education – the research data platform ETIS<sup>6</sup>.

The Ministry of Education and Research (HTM) is in charge of both systems and collects the data. The data are mostly collected from the level of groups of study programs up to the institutional level, with only some data at on the level of individual programmes. Research data are collected at the level of individual academic staff members. Higher education institutions submit their education related data directly, and researchers submit the data about their individual activities (publications, projects etc.).

The current Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) was established in 2009 (with external quality evaluation system having existed already since 1995). EKKA organises quality assessments of study programme groups (at least once every 7 years), institutional accreditations (at least once every 7 years), and the initial evaluations of study programme groups.

In regard to monitoring, higher education institutions define the own indicators that they themselves are monitoring. The indicators for quality assessment procedures are described in EKKA's regulations but were discussed and agreed by all higher education institutions. At the state level, the indicators (as described in Haridussilm<sup>7</sup>) define quality indicators such as the average grades in the state exams of admitted students or the percentage of international academic staff, required when signing performance agreements with higher education institutions. Higher education institutions are expected to report back on performance agreements.

EKKA requires the institutions to submit aggregate data on study programmes within the study programme group (a list of study programmes, responsible structural units, figures related to students [total number of students, admissions, dropouts, graduates] presented as a three-to-five-year trend) (EKKA, 2017).

EKKA is not asked to submit any data to national platforms but the data available on the platforms are used by the agency. EKKA indicates that the data on national platforms, to some extent, correspond to quality indicators from the perspective of EKKA. For example, the trends of international students are used by EKKA during the institutional accreditation. When assessing the quality of groups of study programmes, EKKA prepares comparative analyses of different data (student drop-out rates, graduation rates) for the review experts on the basis of national data. ETIS is also used by experts for the purpose of evaluating the qualifications of academic staff.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://haridussilm.ee/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.etis.ee/?lang=ENG#>

<sup>7</sup> [http://haridussilm.ee/?leht=korg\\_0](http://haridussilm.ee/?leht=korg_0)

When preparing self-evaluation reports the institutions are also asked to submit aggregate data on study programmes within the study programme group (a list of study programmes, responsible structural units, figures related to students (total number of students, admissions, dropouts, graduates) presented as a three-to-five-year trend) (EKKA, 2017).

EKKA also uses the data available on national platforms during the training of experts and institutions during the revision of quality assurance indicators and procedures for thematic analysis.

During EKKA's external assessment by ENQA in 2013 when assessing Standard 2.8 experts concluded that the system-wide analysis by EKKA is mostly focused on the expectations of stakeholders and the consultation process in setting up the new quality assurance system and also analysing the transitional evaluation period (2009 – 2011) and its results (ENQA, 2013).

In 2017 in the self-evaluation report for ENQA review EKKA indicates that according to EKKA Statutes one of its main functions is to analyse assessment results and to make recommendations for improvement to the higher education institutions and also Ministry of Education and Research. The needs for analyses are discussed internally and planned in advance and the results are used both in internal development activities and training courses and seminars for higher education institutions and presented to the Ministry of Education and Science. EKKA prepares annual and period-based analyses of assessment results which are discussed in the meetings of assessment councils and published in the annual reports of the Ministry of Education and Research. (EKKA, 2017)

### **5.3. Latvia**

Currently, the main education information system in Latvia is the State education information system (SEIS)<sup>8</sup>. SEIS contains the register of education institutions, study programmes, and academic staff in the higher education sector. All information except information about study programmes is entered by education institutions. Information about the study programmes is entered by the institution responsible for assessing quality. SEIS receives data from several national information systems, for example, the Enterprise Register, and also provides data for some other systems. Education and science data are separated – there is a National science information system for monitoring science data.

In Latvia higher education institutions prepare annual statistical reports and submit them to MoES. MoES then compiles then and issues an annual report which is public. The report is static and data are not publicly available in the form of a database. Institutions are also required to submit data to several other sources such as the Central Statistical Bureau<sup>9</sup> (there are cases where the data are practically identical but are provided at different levels of detail or from different viewpoints).

The Education Development Guidelines 2014-2017 emphasise that in order to ensure effective, informed education policy it is essential to create a system for monitoring the implementation of policy and educational quality that would give opportunity to all stakeholders to follow, assess, and influence the processes and results related to higher education and financing models.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://viis.lv>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistikas-temas/metodologija/educational-institutions-teaching-staff-and-enrolment-37043.html>

Creating such a system was a priority already in the previous planning period (2007 – 2013) and currently there is an on-going process for developing the concept upon which the system itself will be built. This conception work is developed by an independent contractor in consultation with stakeholders, including the Latvian Higher Education Quality Agency (AIKA). In 2017 MoES designed regulations about the creation of the monitoring system as well as for education more generally.

The monitoring of quality aims to serve as a tool for ensuring quality and improving quality in the higher education sector. That is to say, quality refers to the compliance with objectively set requirements and the responsiveness to the needs of stakeholders. The conception is expected to include a national definition of higher education quality, higher education quality indicators (including quality of higher education institutions, study directions and thematic sectors and groups of education, study programmes, the quality of research and teaching), the aims and a general model for quality monitoring, descriptions and roles of all stakeholders involved as well as mechanism for implementing quality monitoring and cost estimation.<sup>10</sup> The vision of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) is that the conception should cover the following dimensions – governance structure, strategy, academic staff, students, cooperation and internationalisation, resources, and a legal framework. In each of the dimensions there would be goals and indicators at the level of higher education institutions, study directions (sectors) and study programmes. The indicators have to be compatible with the indicators used by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), EUROSTAT and Bologna implementation reports. The study is also expected to describe the role of the AIKA in the higher education quality monitoring process taking into account the principles set in the ESG.

The first quality assurance agency in Latvia was created in 1995 but since 2015 the re-established AIKA has assumed responsibility for these processes. Currently AIKA performs three types of procedures – the accreditation of study directions, the accreditation of higher education institutions and the ex-ante accreditation of study programmes.

There are set forms for self-assessment reports for study directions<sup>11</sup> and higher education institutions. The forms prescribe the submission of analyses complimented by statistical data (quantitative not qualitative), with data on, enrolment numbers, students, graduates, mobility statistics and rates, information about academic staff involved in the implementation of studies, the CV's of academic staff, and descriptions of study courses).

Currently the cyclical external quality assurance in Latvia is based on assessment of what are called study directions. Study directions contain all programmes of study in the same thematic area. There are 29 study directions defined by the national regulations<sup>12</sup>. All existing study programmes were classified and grouped into study directions in 2012 and since then all of the new programmes are opened in one of these 29 study directions. Study direction is a national term but the quality assessment procedure takes place for the study direction in each separate institution and decision is also taken about study direction in each institution. This creates a situation where the quality assurance procedures do not necessarily offer the possibility to compare programmes of the same type and level across the whole country. This is one of the reasons why MoES would welcome a central higher education (quality) monitoring system.

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<sup>10</sup> From technical specification for the Latvian higher education monitoring system

<sup>12</sup> List with study directions - <http://www.enga.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/AIC-study-directions-ENG.pdf>

AIKA is currently analysing approaches to quality monitoring performed by quality assurance agencies in the EHEA in order to define the focus and to define the connection between the national higher education quality monitoring system and the activities to be done by the quality assurance agency.

Currently the main focus of monitoring has been monitoring the implementation of recommendations formulated by the experts. Recommendations are collected and higher education institutions are asked to submit action plans on how they will be implemented. Depending on the accreditation term for each study direction there are certain milestones for submitting progress reports on the implementation. The system for monitoring intends to be focused on the results of quality assurance procedures and the data collected during procedures.

Public funding for higher education institutions consists of a subsidy for education (87%) distributed on the basis of the number of student places and a subsidy for research (13%) (OECD, 2016). In 2014 the World Bank proposed a “three-pillar” funding model that was endorsed by the Latvian government and as a result additional public funding criteria based on the performance were introduced that will also be reflected in the monitoring system.

The current educational quality monitoring processes are fragmented at all levels of education. One of the main challenges is the lack of a unified approach to educational quality monitoring. At the national level there is a lack of a single system of concrete and measurable indicators and currently available data provide only a fragmented view on indicators and changes. In order to contribute to the improvement of education policy there must be a systematic, long term and continuous process of collecting and analysing information (on the international, national, regional, and local level).

## **6. Conclusions**

The concept of monitoring in higher education has a very broad meaning. The actual interpretation depends on the context, purpose behind monitoring (data, policy, and strategy) and the institution or stakeholder who is using the term.

In general, there is an increasingly widespread trend to use the term “monitor” but it is not always justified since data collection is often purposeless and there is often little in the way of actual analysis of the data. It is important to design and implement a higher education monitoring system that would serve the national context and would not affect the autonomy of quality assurance agencies.

Following the trend of quality assurance going across borders, the role and functions of national quality assurance agencies could change significantly and the added value of having a national body would assist with the safeguarding of national identity thus moving closer to purpose of monitoring higher education.

In order to effectively use resources, the optimal solution would be a national level monitoring tool that serves both the needs of governments and the quality assurance agency and is also available to the wider society. The tool should be formed as a network that includes all of the relevant databases in a network of national education monitoring that both connects them and ensures data protection and confidentiality. In general, the development of new databases for specific monitoring purposes should be avoided if possible. All of the statistical data should be transparent and available to policy makers. Furthermore, new institutions that

have mandates delegated by the government should have access to these data and the possibility to obtain cross-sectional data from those sources.

It would be beneficial for the higher education institutions and also for the national structures administrating higher education if one type of data was collected from the higher education institutions (or another respondent) only once. Afterwards, the structure of the tool would allow further analysis and adjusting the focus to each specific case. The processes of submitting different reports should be digitalised as much as possible.

The data available in the system should be improved mostly by extending the series of data to several years. It may take at least four years until authorities will have solid information for decision-making on the specific topic.

The comparison of data, preparation and monitoring of higher education statistics should be done by MoES or by other institutions authorised to perform it. The national monitoring institution should cooperate closely with quality assurance agencies in providing the data necessary for quality assurance procedures. Quality assurance agencies themselves could be involved in such kinds of monitoring only if it is one of their other functions that are both structurally and legally separated from the function of the other quality assurance agency.

Agencies should perform analysis about their actions but should not collect and/or analyse the impact or their analysis on the general higher education system.

Quality assurance in general should be about the quality culture and the quality of processes and procedures. Statistical data in quality assurance should be used mostly to complement findings and ensure that the procedures and measures taken reflect and correspond to the tendencies observed when analysing the data.

Quality assurance agencies should be independent in their decisions and base their decisions on reports of external experts, and the outcome of any assessment should not be free from the influence of external factors.



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## **Annex 1**

### National higher education monitoring systems Survey for the representatives of higher education quality assurance agencies

- Q1. Is the term “higher education (data) monitoring” generally used in your country? If yes, by whom and in what context?
- Q2. Is there a national level system for collecting and monitoring data (statistics, performance indicators) about higher education in your country? Is it public, to what extent? If it is at least to some extent public, provide link to the portal. If there are several sources, please provide links to all of them.
- Q3. Who (what organisation) is in charge of the system and in charge of collecting the data?
- Q4. What kind of data are collected and on what level (on the level of study programmes, higher education institutions, thematic study areas, regions, the whole country)?
- Q5. Who submits the data (higher education institutions, authorities etc.)?
- Q6. Is the national/regional quality assurance agency asked to submit any data for the system/portal? If yes, what kind of data and with what regularity?
- Q7. Are there annual/biannual reports analysing the data collected in the system and the trends in national higher education system? Are the reports public? If yes, please provide the links to some of the recent ones.
- Q8. Are the data collected on the national data monitoring system somehow related to higher education quality indicators from the perspective of your quality assurance agency?
- Q9. Are the data available in the national data monitoring system or the system itself somehow used in external quality assurance performed by your quality assurance agency? Why? Please elaborate on the procedure.
- Q10. Do the data available for a certain higher education programme/institution somehow influence the result of external quality assurance result? Please elaborate.
- Q11. Does your quality assurance agency use the results available on the national higher education monitoring system/portal for any other purposes not counting external quality assurance procedures (for example, preparing system wide analyses, identifying trends in higher education, revising quality assurance indicators and procedures etc.)?
- Q12. In case your agency does not use the data available on the national higher education monitoring system/ portal or there is no such portal – do you use any statistical data for your quality assurance procedures at all and where and how do you collect them?

## **Annex 2**

### Abbreviations

AIKA	Latvian Higher Education Quality Agency
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EKKA	Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
MOSTA	Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre
SEIS	State Education Information System
SKVC	Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education