



2021

**SELF-ASSESSMENT
REPORT OF QUALITY
ASSURANCE AGENCY
ACTIVITIES**



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I – CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the Center for Quality Assessment in Higher Education of (hereinafter – SKVC, Center) in 1995, it functions as a national quality assurance (QA) agency and as an academic recognition and information center for foreign qualifications (member of the ENIC / NARIC networks). We strive for the harmonisation of the provisions of the Lithuanian higher education system and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), we guarantee the fulfilment of Lithuania's international obligations in the field of higher education and research according to our competence. SKVC is a member of the ENQA, CEENQA, INQAAHE networks and an EQAR registered agency.

The scope of the Centre's activities is all Lithuanian higher education, all types of higher education institutions, regardless of the form of ownership – both state and non-state (including higher education institutions operating under conditions of exile), as well as both sectors – universities and colleges of higher education. We are responsible for the external evaluation and accreditation of study programs that are classified in levels 5-7 of the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework, as well as for non-degree studies, and for institutional review. SKVC performs ex-ante and ex-post type procedures. External evaluation and accreditation activities, although the largest in volume, are only part of the quality assurance work. Our areas of activity also include consultations on various issues pertaining to external evaluation, publicity and analysis of evaluation results, follow-up activities, organization of various events, and drafting of legal acts regulating higher education studies. We care about higher education as a public good, and we understand quality as an agreement and joint responsibility of social stakeholders, therefore we participate in as active members of the Lithuanian academic community and dialogue is important to us. We also represent Lithuania abroad, we are active members of international networks, as well as various working groups. From an international perspective, the Centre's activities are not limited to the territory of Lithuania: SKVC is also responsible for the provision of Lithuanian universities and colleges abroad (if any), as well as, on the basis of EQAR membership, evaluates higher education institutions and their study programmes abroad. The Center also partially supervises the activities of branches of foreign higher education institutions in Lithuania. Other quality assurance agencies may operate in the country as regulated by law or established in international agreements, but in all cases the Center is empowered to make accreditation decisions (based on its own assessment or the assessment of another EQAR-registered or another agency as per international treaties). Evaluation of medical residency studies and institutional review of higher education institutions is the exclusive prerogative of SKVC, except for the evaluation of priest education in seminaries.

This self-assessment report has been prepared as a basis for the third external evaluation under a targeted evaluation procedure to determine the compliance of SKVC's activities with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG-2015) and to meet the requirements of the Law on Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Lithuania that an external evaluation of the Center's activities be carried out at least every 5 years and that its results need to be made public. The first evaluation of SKVC in 2012-2013 and its positive results enabled to become a then full member of ENQA and to be included in the EQAR – the register of trustworthy external quality assurance agencies. The second ENQA-coordinated evaluation in 2016-2017 created the preconditions for continued membership in ENQA and EQAR, and demonstrated that the Center was able to improve its performance, and the expert advice we received led us to set ourselves even higher goals. The 2019 Progress Report and the voluntary follow-up visit by the experts provided an opportunity to present how the Center took into account the recommendations of the peer review and continued its activities. According to the ENQA and EQAR guidelines, quality agencies that have been

positively evaluated twice may be subject to a simplified evaluation every 10 years, so SKVC avails itself of this opportunity. SKVC was preparing for the third external evaluation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The third external evaluation, same as previous ones, pursues a number of objectives: public accountability, improvement of the Centre's performance through self-assessment and expert advice, and continuation of our membership in ENQA and EQAR as a credible, transparent agency meeting international quality standards. This is very important for us, our Founder and other stakeholders in Lithuania and abroad. Quality shall be not taken for granted, it is a hard path we take, it requires constant efforts to work, learn, share, create and innovate.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT (SAR)

This report was prepared by the self-assessment working group, which included 11 employees: senior management (Mr. Almantas Šerpatauskas, Director and Ms. Aurelija Valeikienė, Deputy Director (working group leader)); middle level managers (Ms. Rasa Penkauskienė, Head of the Institutional Review Division; Ms. Aušra Leskauskaitė, Acting Adviser of the Study Assessment Division; Ms. Ieva Vaiciukevičienė, Head of the Legal and General Affairs Division; Ms. Rima Žilinskaitė, Adviser of the Qualifications Assessment Division), evaluation coordinators (Ms. Jolanta Revaitienė, Ms. Rugilė Blusevičienė, Ms. Giedrė Antanavičienė from the Institutional Review Division; and Ms. Natalija Bogdanova and Dr. Domantas Markevičius from the Study Evaluation Division).

The self-assessment took several months to perform, intermittently. At the beginning of the year, regular working group meetings were held (minutes taken), and later – individual work was carried out. The staff worked on individual parts of the text, the content was discussed during the joint meeting, and feedback was provided. We analyzed publicly available self-assessment reports by other quality assurance agencies, as well as external assessment reports, delved into ENQA Board decisions and EQAR expectations on ESG interpretation, and participated in a remote workshop on targeted reviews by ENQA and EQAR representatives.

Discussions took place with the Centre's staff on the organization and further planning of our as QA Agency work, as well as with the Council which is the Centre's highest governing body. The members of the Centre's advisory bodies, the Study Program Appeals Commission (24 September 2021) and the Study Evaluation Commission (05 October 2021), have been consulted on the regulation of current assessments and the possible improvement of our own activities. Feedback on the quality of SKVC activities from the main external stakeholders – students, universities, representatives of the business world – experts was gathered after the evaluations and events, as well as during the discussion on the suitability of the current model of and future of QA in Lithuania (on 14 December 2021). Data from the Centre's annual reports and the strategic plan, results of thematic analyzes and surveys, and official statistics were used for the self-assessment.

The self-assessment started when it was already announced that the agencies would be able to be evaluated in a simplified way, but it was not yet clear what this targeted procedure would be, so we initially started preparations for a full [usual] evaluation. The SAR was then abridged, amended in line with ENQA's advice on how to present the results of the self-assessment. According to the Terms of Reference for the external review of the Centre as agreed with EQAR and ENQA, the targeted review of SKVC must include the following:

- ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance [applicable to all] because of orientation towards improvement, thus this part was included;
- ESG Standards 2.1-2.7, in case new activities were started or there were substantial changes to the current procedures. Since in 2018-2019 the Center completed previous evaluations and in 2020 a new evaluation cycle with partially updated processes, criteria and indicators has been launched, and the

scope of SKVC's activities has been extended with a new type of evaluation, thus examining compliance with ESG Part 2 is relevant;

- at least one area to which the agency pays extra attention – in the case of SKVC, two provisions have been chosen – ESG 2.2 and 2.5, as we seek expert comments and guidance on our new methodologies and criteria and indicators;
- those standards for which the Register Committee has assessed compliance as partial; in the case of SKVC, these were not identified by ENQA's experts, while EQAR disagreed with ENQA's expert opinion on ESG 3.5 (Resources) and 2.7 (Complaints and Appeals), stating that compliance with these standards was not "substantial" but "partial"; therefore, our compliance with these provisions is presented accordingly;
- According to the tripartite agreement between SKVC, ENQA and EQAR, it is noted that ESG 3.3 should be reflected upon, in particular regarding the initiation of institutional review of higher education institutions and securing of the Centre's funding, therefore the self-assessment report provides relevant information below.

In view of the above, this self-assessment report consists of sections presenting changes in Lithuanian higher education and in the context of SKVC's work, our main activities and history as a quality assurance agency, further examining the Centre's compliance with ESG 3.3 and 3.5, and how the Centre's work and overall Lithuania's external quality assurance framework is in line with the expectations and requirements of ESG Part 2. The document focuses on describing the progress made in response to the observations made by the experts during the second review and the areas for improvement identified by the Center, presenting concrete measures and the results achieved. The activities of SKVC as an ENIC / NARIC center are presented and analyzed only in the general context of the higher education system and regarding the implementation of the provisions of ESG 1.4, and are not examined in other sections.

The self-assessment report was first written in Lithuanian, and then translated into English, using www.DeepL.com/Translator and Google translator, relevant amendments made.

3. CHANGES SINCE THE LAST FULL REVIEW

3.1 RESULTS OF THE PREVIOUS REVIEW OF SKVC

SKVC as a QA agency was first externally evaluated by an international expert panel coordinated by ENQA in 2012, and in 2016-2017 a second review took place. The positive results of both led to continued membership in ENQA and registration in the EQAR. The Center pays a lot of attention to improving its performance, so the second review was better than the first one. It is also important to note that the second review was based on the ESG-2015 which contains increased expectations and requirements compared to the ESG-2005 version.

In 2017 ENQA expert group in the report¹ has established that the Centre's activities comply with ESG-2015 as set out below:

- 3.1 Quality Assurance Activities, Policies and Processes - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 3.2. Official status - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 3.3. Independence - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 3.4. Thematic analyzes - SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLIANT

¹ https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/ENQA_Agency_Reviews_SKVC_final_report_21-June_2017.pdf

- 3.5. Resources - SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLIANT
- 3.6. Internal quality assurance and professionalism - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 3.7. Periodic external evaluation of agencies - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 2.1. Taking internal quality assurance into account - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 2.2. Developing methodologies that meet the objective - SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLIANT
- 2.3. Implementation processes - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 2.4. Experts - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 2.5. Evaluation criteria - SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLIANT
- 2.6. Findings of the evaluation - FULLY COMPLIANT
- 2.7. Complaints and appeals - SUBSTANTIALLY COMPLIANT

Based on the results of the self-assessment and the recommendations made by the experts, work was carried out on five standards where full compliance with ESG expectations was not found (ESG 3.4; 3.5; 2.2; 2.5; 2.7), as well as on others where recommendations or observations were made by the experts from ENQA or by the EQAR Register Committee (ESG 3.1; 3.6; 2.4; 2.6). The detailed Progress Report sent to the ENQA Board in 2019 received a very positive evaluation.

In addition, the Centre took the opportunity to voluntarily participate in a follow-up visit in 2019 with two former members of the ENQA Expert Group, to whom it presented the progress of the implementation of the recommendations and discussed other relevant issues, an experience which we consider to be very positive and useful.

As required, reports on the substantial changes in the Centre's activities and changes in the overall external evaluation system have been submitted to the EQAR Registry Committee in 2020 and 2021.

Unfortunately, not all issues of concern following the second ENQA evaluation have been fully resolved, the sustainable financing and human resources of the Centre being the main concerns. These issues continue to be addressed through active consultation with the Council and the Ministry as the Centre's founder. By the time of the expert visit in early 2022, we hope to have achieved greater clarity in these areas.

The Centre goes beyond the self-assessment and external evaluation of one of its function groups, the quality agency. As a national ENIC/NARIC centre, the SKVC carried out a voluntary self-assessment in 2015 and was externally evaluated by an international team of experts in 2016, in accordance with the SQUARE Methodology and the Guidelines and Standards. We are proud that the SKVC's performance has been rated highly. In 2019-2021, the Centre was involved in the international project I-Comply, in which international experts evaluated not only the Centre's activities as the ENIC/NARIC Centre, but also the entire academic recognition framework in Lithuania. Good practices were identified and suggestions for improvement were received. At the end of 2021, the SKVC as an academic information centre drafted a second self-assessment report and is preparing for a visit by an international team of experts in spring 2022.

3.2. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM OF LITHUANIA

Network of higher education institutions

Since 2000, the higher education system has been binary: it consists of university and colleges of higher education sectors. Colleges offer professional bachelor's degrees, while universities offer bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. College studies are more applied, while university studies are more academic. Over the last few years, there have been changes in the network of higher education institutions, with the total number of institutions decreasing. Aleksandras Stulginskis University and the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences joined Vytautas Magnus University in a reorganisation; Šiauliai University joined Vilnius University. Three non-

state colleges have also decided to cease their activities (Šiaurės Lietuvos kolegija, A.V. Graičiūno aukštoji vadybos mokykla, Kooperacijos kolegija). As of 10 December 2021, 36 Lithuanian higher education institutions are operational.

	Universities	Colleges	total
State	11	12	23
Non-state	6	7	13
Iš viso	17	19	36

1 table. Higher education institutions by type.

These changes in the network of higher education institutions have a direct impact on the scope and coverage of the work of the SKVC: while the number of objects of external comprehensive evaluation is declining, in cases of closures, the Centre has an additional obligation to ensure the rights of students to complete quality studies and to monitor the performance of study activities on an annual basis. Moreover, in the case of institutional review, in the event of a merger of higher education institutions or a significant internal restructuring (e.g. in the case of Klaipėda University), the internal optimisation and their impact need to be reflected in both the self-assessment and the conclusions of the external evaluation.

The 2018 amendments to the Law on H&R introduced a new possible status of a higher education institution - a Higher Education Institution in Exile which is a Lithuanian higher education institution whose activities in its country of origin have been interrupted for political reasons. So far, there is only one higher education institution with this status – the European Humanities University, which is originally from Belarus and has found refuge in Lithuania; it was granted this status in 2019. The Law on H&R also provided for a separate external evaluation procedure for this type of higher education institution, to the development of which the Centre has made a significant contribution, and for this purpose the Centre has developed and approved a separate methodology for the evaluation of higher education institutions operating in an exile environment.

Students, teaching staff

Available data for the start of the 2020-2021 academic year (when there were 41 higher education institutions: 19 universities and 22 colleges) show a further downward trend compared to previous years, due to natural demographic reasons and the fact that some students tend to choose to study abroad.

Start of 2020-2021 academic year	Universities	Colleges of HE	total
Student number	71,9 thous.	32,5 thous.	104 thous.
Change of student numbers compared with:			
2017, when 82 577 studied at universities, and 35 446 students were in colleges	Decreased 9 577 thous. (12 %)	Decreased 2 446 thous. (7 %)	Decreased 12 023 thous. (11 %)
2018/2019, when 77,3 thous. studied at universities, and 34 thous. students in colleges	Decreased 4,3 thous. (5,6 %)	Decreased 1 thous. (3 %)	Decreased 5,3 thous. (5 %)
2019/2020, when 73 thous. studied at universities, and 33 thous. students in colleges	Decreased 1,1 thous. (1,5 %)	Decreased 0,5 thous. (1,5 %)	Decreased 1,6 thous. (1,5 %)

2 table. Change of student numbers in universities and colleges of higher education in 2017-2021.

At the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, 12 thous. or almost 11.6% of all students were studying in non-state HEIs (7 universities and 10 colleges) (compared to 11.2 thous. or 10.6% in 2019-2020).

According to the data for the same period, 6.9 thous. foreign nationals studied full-time at universities, which accounted for 9.6% of all university students; 634 foreign students studied full-time at colleges. One fifth (21.4%) of foreign students studying in higher education institutions are citizens of European countries, while

more than one third (34.2%) come from Asian countries. The number of foreign students in Lithuania is steadily increasing: in 2010, 1,323 students came to Lithuania for full-time studies, up from 5,946 in 2017 and, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, is continuing to grow, reaching 7,392 in 2020; hence, the need for, and the importance of, the academic recognition of qualifications obtained abroad is growing. This issue is also given greater attention in the updated ex-ante evaluation of programmes, ex-post study fields and in the ex-post institutional evaluation as of 2020-01-01. Growing number of international students helps HEIs to compensate to some extent decrease of national students and requires efforts from HEIs to offer more programmes in foreign languages, support for international students, investment in faculty staff to develop their qualifications in foreign languages, multicultural environment. However this situation does not have significant impact on external quality assurance activities, but requires a closer attention to issues related to provision of education services not only to national but international students as well their integration. During ex-post institutional reviews separate attention is given to internationalisation strategy, also student services and integration of international students; on request separate meetings are arranged with the panels of experts (depending upon the number of foreign students enrolled).

According to the statistics for 2020-2021, there were 7922 lecturers in universities and 2448 in colleges. The total number of lecturers in HEIs for the period 2020-2021 is listed as 5,974 in full time positions and 4,615 in part-time positions, some of whom are practitioners, some of whom are also working in other HEIs.

The National Qualifications framework

From 1993-94, a tiered system of studies was introduced, based on a three-cycle structure. The Lithuanian Qualifications Framework (LTQF), introduced in 2010, links higher education qualifications to levels 6-8, which corresponds to levels 6-8 of the European Qualifications Framework. The referencing of the LQF with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) started in 2010 and was completed in 2012.

The biggest change in the qualifications framework since the last review of SKVC – according to the 2018 revision of the Law on H&R, short cycle linked to level 5 of the LTQF/EQF in the higher education system have been introduced. The Law on H&R regulates their place in the system (it has been clarified that they can only be carried out in colleges), their credit volume (from 90 to 120 ECTS) and their purpose (they are carried out in the fields of study defined by the MoE and recommended by the Sectoral Professional Committees). At the Ministry level, the legal framework is now in place (the description of the cycles of studies was updated on 15.10.2020 and the General Requirements for the Conduct of Studies were updated on 15.11.2021) so that short cycle studies can be launched successfully. It is also already foreseen that the external evaluation of short cycle programmes will be the responsibility of the Centre, and the methodology for ex-ante evaluation of study programmes of the SKVC has been revised for this purpose. No such programmes have been submitted and no such evaluations have taken place yet, although it is known that the colleges are interested in this possibility.

Studies in colleges can only be provided within the short cycle (leading to a diploma) and the first cycle (leading to a professional bachelor degree). University studies remain of three cycles, leading to a bachelor, master, doctor in sciences or doctor of arts degree respectively. The Master's degree may also be awarded on completion of studies integrating the first and second cycle (in the fields of medicine, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, architecture, law, religious studies).

Studies can only be carried out in accredited study programmes/study fields run by accredited higher education institutions and included in the Register of Studies, Curricula and Qualifications (SMPKR), as reflected in the Open Information and Consultation System (AIKOS). The national registers of institutions (ŠMIR) and programmes (SMPKR) are managed by the MoE and maintained by the National Agency for

The last five years have seen systemic change, with a decline in the number of higher education institutions and local students and the number of study programmes, but an increase in internationalisation, and intense legislative activity.

Education (NŠA), to which the Centre communicates data on the accreditation status of programmes and HEIs, and also provides evaluation reports for publication in order to be reflected in AIKOS.

Classification of studies

The study classification system has changed since 2017. The division of studies into fields of study has been abolished and branches are no longer distinguished within fields of study. There are 17 groups of fields of study (mathematical sciences, computer sciences, physical sciences, life sciences, engineering sciences, technological sciences, health sciences, veterinary sciences, agricultural sciences, social sciences, law, business and public administration, educational sciences, humanities, arts, sports, public security). The study groups are assigned to the corresponding fields of study, of which there are 110 in total. Until 2017, the award of qualifications referred to a field of study (e.g. Bachelor of Philology, Master of Science in Physics) or a branch of study (e.g. Bachelor of Science in Applied Mathematics, Bachelor of Science in International Business, Master of Science in Demography). From 2017, the title of the qualification is made up of the name of the field of study group and the title of the degree (e.g. Bachelor of Physical Sciences, Master of Physical Sciences).

The change in the classification of studies is considered during the planning for the Centre's activities, for grouping the subjects to be assessed, for selection and formation of expert panels accordingly, to determine the correspondence of studies to the specific requirements of a given field of study in accordance with the descriptions of fields of study. Otherwise, changes in study classification have no significant impact on external quality assurance procedures as the number of study programmes does not change with the changes of classification. So the workload does not depend on classification but rather on the number of study programmes in the system.

Usage of learning outcomes

Qualifications are regulated at national level and are based on learning outcomes. In Lithuania, there is a whole hierarchy of documents defining learning outcomes: the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework; descriptions of study cycles; descriptions of fields of study; and each study programme has its own description of expected learning outcomes, linked to teaching and assessment methods. The external evaluation of studies examines both the expected learning outcomes and the achieved learning outcomes, as well as teaching and student assessment.

Study cycle description² sets out the study outcomes for each study level and the associated qualification(s). The learning outcomes for the qualifications are expressed in terms of knowledge and its application, research competences, specific competences, personal competences and social competences. The description of the

The Lithuanian higher education system is based on the principle of harmonisation with the European Higher Education Area and is an integral part of the EHEA.

study levels is based on the European Area of Higher Education (EAME) framework and the descriptions of the levels of higher education, which are aligned with the descriptions of the EAME framework (the Dublin Descriptions).

Since 2012, the Centre has been coordinating the development of the next generation of study descriptions³, which are approved by the MoE. Between 2012 and 2018, the ESF-funded SKAR, SKAR-2 and SKAR-3 projects developed the descriptions of the next generation of fields of study. As of 04.09.2018, the SKAR-3 project is still ongoing, with a total of 53 descriptors planned to be updated or developed. As of the beginning of December 2021, 20 new descriptors (out of 22) and 16 updated descriptors (out of the 37 for

² first approved by MoE Order No V-2212 of 21 November 2011

https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/346_6b83703b532be84be32dd512a348eae6.pdf ; new Order No V-1012 of 16 November 2016 (on the introduction of short-cycle studies), the currently valid text is available only in Lithuanian at <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/775fbb90ac0711e6b844f0f29024f5ac>

³ The earlier ones were called „regulations“, and only a very small number of them were drawn up

which a need for updating has been identified) have already been approved. Currently, 35 descriptors have been translated into English and are much needed for international evaluations of the fields of study. The Study Field Descriptor is the cornerstone document on which higher education institutions rely when developing new or improving existing programmes in a given field of study. It provides basic guidance on how to shape the learning outcomes of a new programme or to develop an existing programme, describes the scope of the field of study, and defines the requirements for the delivery of study programmes. For each study programme, the higher education institution shall draw up a programme description. It formulates the study objectives and links them to the expected learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) for the programme and the qualification to be awarded upon completion. Catholic study programmes in the field of theology are subject not only to the requirements of Lithuania, but also to the requirements of the Holy See.

Academic recognition

Following the signing of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) by Lithuania on 7 April 1997 and its ratification by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania on 15 October 1998⁴, the country is gradually moving from a highly centralised to a more decentralised system of national recognition, with a wider range of actors and constantly changing roles. Currently, the competences of the institutions are laid down in the Law on H&R and the recognition procedure is regulated at the level of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania (LRV). As of 29/02/2012, since the adoption of the new framework for general recognition by LRV Resolution 212 on 02/02/2012, decentralisation in academic recognition is increasing. The role of the MoE is to define the principles of recognition of partial studies (to be carried out by higher education institutions), to empower higher education institutions to carry out the academic recognition for own admission purposes, and to manage the appeals commission. The SKVC, as an ENIC/NARIC centre, is responsible for the assessment and recognition of all foreign qualifications related to higher education (qualifications conferring the right to higher education and higher education first and second cycle qualifications), in addition to advising higher education institutions, monitoring the decisions taken by the authorised higher education institutions, and reporting on the decisions taken by the authorised higher education institutions to the MoE and to the other authorities concerned. This Resolution No 212 abolished the procedure for the nostrification of doctoral degrees previously carried out by the Research Council of Lithuania (LMT) and stipulated that qualifications attesting to the completion of the third cycle must be recognised (by the same responsible authority designated – LMT).

Although Law on H&R and the 2012 Government Resolution stipulated that authorised HEIs could apply for and be granted the right to academic recognition (based on the recommendations of the SKVC), it was only in 2016 that the first two universities applied to the Ministry for this right. Since then, an increasing number of HEIs have joined the recognition system each year; currently 16 HEIs are part of the partially decentralised system. As an ENIC/NARIC centre, the SKVC provides advice to all HEIs, assists them in preparing for the independent implementation of academic recognition, and carries out other functions typical of academic recognition and information centres.

Since the last SKVC self-assessment, there have been further developments in the field of recognition. On 24 April 2017, the Ministry approved the revised principles according to which higher education institutions should recognise competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning by means of an Order of V-289, and on 06/08/2020 a revised procedure for the credit transfer of partial studies was approved by an Order No. V-1174, which allows for the recognition of prior learning as part of higher education studies. The new descriptions of procedures for the external evaluation of studies and the institutional evaluation and accreditation of higher education institutions approved by the MoE in 2019, as well as the revised methodologies for ex-ante and ex-post evaluations of the SKVC, place greater emphasis on recognition of all types from 01/01/2020 (as will be described later in this report).

⁴ Lithuania was the fifth country, a member of the Council of Europe, to ratify the Convention, after which, according to the terms of the treaties, the LRC entered into force as an international treaty

SKVC has drafted and is currently discussing with the MoE a draft amendment to the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No 212, which would enable:

- Academic recognition of vocational education and training qualifications (previously not foreseen), which will allow both the holders of these qualifications to better integrate in Lithuania and employers to understand the value of such qualifications and to recruit people more smoothly,
- automatic recognition of Bologna qualifications not only on the basis of international treaties, but also *de facto*, thus implementing the Council of Europe's Recommendation of 26/11/2018 (2018/C 444/01) on the automatic recognition of qualifications from European Union (EU) countries that meet certain criteria;
- It is also foreseen that for the purpose of studies, all higher education institutions will have the right of academic recognition of foreign qualifications and will all be included in the monitoring system for recognition decisions (to be supervised by the SKVC as ENIC/NARIC centre) and will have to follow the recommendations provided by the SKVC. This will enable greater autonomy for HEIs in the area of recognition, better quality of recognition decisions and compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and international good practice;
- Review the responsibilities of all institutions involved in the academic recognition system (HEIs, VET, general education, MoE, LMT, SKVC), to better target services and enable SKVC to better identify and propose solutions to problems related to the quality of internationalisation.

External quality assurance of higher education

Quality assurance is carried out through a number of external and internal instruments, involving a whole range of institutions. The following instruments are used for quality assurance in Lithuania:

- Studies and related activities are licensed in Lithuania, i.e. you need to obtain a permit in advance to carry out such activities. The Centre provides an opinion on the readiness of a higher education institution to carry out studies and study-related activities. The decision to grant a permit is taken by the MoE.
- An important part of the quality assurance system is the contribution of the HEIs themselves to quality assurance. They have internal quality assurance systems in place and under development, in line with ESG provisions, and the results of self-assessments and external evaluations allow them to further develop their capacity and improve quality.
- External evaluation and accreditation of HEIs and their study programmes/fields are regularly carried out, i.e. procedures to determine whether the objects of evaluation and accreditation meet the minimum quality requirements and how they could be improved. The external evaluation of institutions and short-cycle, first-cycle, second-cycle and professional HE study programmes shall be organised by the Centre in accordance with the procedure laid down by law, which shall take a decision on accreditation following the external evaluation. The legislation also gives higher education institutions the right to apply to any EQAR agency for the external evaluation of their study programmes/fields. As of the end of 2019, the grouping of assessment objects, assessment areas, indicators and criteria, the grading scale and the accreditation period have changed.
- The evaluation of the readiness of a higher education institution to conduct doctoral studies, the supervision of third cycle studies and the evaluation of research and experimental development activities and the arts are carried out by the LMT. The first international benchmarking t was organised by MOSTA in 2018, and it is foreseen that the LMT will continue to carry out this activity. At the time of the self-assessment, it has not yet been fully determined which assessments will be carried out, as the system is being remodelled following the Constitutional Court's decision in 2021. Both during evaluation of studies (ex-ante and ex-post) and institutional reviews, links between research and higher education are assessed by SKVC, without repeating research evaluation, but rather taking LMT results and analysing how research and artistic activities provide basis for quality teaching, implementation of

missions of HEIs to provide studies and advance the knowledge base, and engage in knowledge transfer, etc.

- Monitoring of access to and quality of education and training is carried out by MoE and STRATA (formerly MOSTA). From 2019, the SKVC is tasked with monitoring the indicators for the fields of study.
- Advice to higher education institutions and institutions implementing science and study policy is provided by the MoE, the Centre, STRATA, LMT and other institutions.
- Preventive measures are implemented by the MoE, SKVC, STRATA, LMT and other institutions. Preventive measures at the moment are not further specified in legislation.
- Complaints from students and other members of the academic community are dealt with by the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics, as well as by the Centre (in accordance with approved procedures) and other organisations. In addition to the provision of recommendations, the application of impact measures is foreseen (e.g. in the case of justified student complaints, the MoE may initiate targeted evaluations at the level of study programmes).
- Promotion of quality improvement and quality culture (through training, outstanding quality awards, e.g. for top researchers, other measures).
- As of 18/11/2021, following the revision of Law on H&R, it is stipulated that, in addition to the above measures, the quality of scientific and/or artistic activities and studies shall also be ensured through the definition of conditions for admission to higher education institutions (it is stipulated who can be admitted to higher education studies and how – educational attainment, types of qualifications, number of matriculation examinations, arithmetic average of grades and principles for the determination of the number of places to be taken).

In the future, the SKVC is likely to play a more prominent role in the monitoring of the higher education system, linked to the reform of higher education funding and the introduction of contracts between the state and higher education institutions, following the adoption of the relevant amendments to Law on H&R. Discussions are also currently underway on the establishment of a national graduate career tracking system and the role of the different institutions in it.

3.3 CURRENT AND NEW EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES OF SKVC

The vision of the SKVC is while building on competence and partnership, working together with key social stakeholders, to create a dynamic, coherent, effective, shared-values higher education in Lithuania and Europe that is attractive and valued by individuals, organisations and society. In its activities, the SKVC implements the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. One of the objectives of the Centre is to promote the quality and quality culture of Lithuanian higher education and thus contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education in Lithuania and abroad. These activities are continuous and ongoing, but in the period between the last self-assessment in 2016 and this self-assessment, significant changes have taken place in the entire quality assurance system in Lithuania, including changes in legislation approved at the level of the LRV, MoE and SKVC respectively, procedures under the previous regulations were completed and the new types of assessments launch, as well as planning of further assessments to be implemented in the next few years was done. The Centre's activities abroad have intensified, both in terms of involvement in various development assistance projects and in terms of evaluating the quality of the programmes offered by higher education institutions abroad.

The variety and scope of SKVC's activities as a quality assurance agency has increased between 2017 and 2021.

In Lithuania, the external evaluation (both ex-ante and ex-post procedures) carried out by the SKVC in the field of quality assurance in higher education is one large group of activities. Other, smaller but equally important activities are related to consultations on quality improvement, publicity of information on the Centre's activities and the results of external evaluation, sharing good practices during training and other events, cooperation with different target groups on improvement of the regulation of higher education, and other topical issues. In the last three years, dialogue with the academic community has been given greater emphasis, with an informal network of quality managers and regular contacts with student unions' representatives.

During the period between 2017 and end of 2021, the Centre as QA agency has achieved results as follows:

- 7 institutions reviews of HEIs (ex-post institutional reviews, 2 re-evaluations at 2 universities and 5 reviews within a new cycle – of 2 universities and 3 colleges) performed;
- 16 thematic analyses and overviews written;
- 193 evaluations of new study programmes organised (ex-ante evaluations of programmes, including residency studies);
- 296 decisions on the accreditation of ongoing study programmes (ex-post programmes) taken;
- 29 evaluations of fields of study and 103 decisions on the evaluation of the field and level of study (ex-post fields of study) coordinated;
- evaluations of 5 study programmes of a foreign higher education institution (ex-post programmes abroad) carried out;
- evaluation of 1 application for the establishment of a higher education institution (ex-ante institutional review) completed;
- 5 forums with student organisations organised;
- 5 events for HEI staff responsible for internal quality assurance (so-called quality assurance forums) arranged;
- 4 international conferences (each with at least 90 participants) organised;
- 20 individual [generic] consultations for HEIs on institutional review provided;
- more than 10 training events for experts from abroad (for institutional review, evaluation of study programmes and fields of study), 6 training events for experts from Lithuania, 3 training events for student reviewers organised;
- 13 seminars for HEI representatives in charge of drafting self-evaluation reports of both programme and fields of study arranged;
- 2 follow-up seminars for representatives of higher education institutions and 2 follow-up visits to higher education institutions organised.

It should be noted that in 2017, the first cycle of institutional reviews of HEIs (ex-post institutional reviews) and the evaluation of study programmes (ex-post programme evaluation) were completed and preparations for the second cycle of HEI evaluation (ex-post institutional reviews) and the transition from the evaluation of programmes of study to the evaluation of fields of study (ex-post evaluation of fields of study) were launched. In the period 2017-2019, the number of evaluations decreased due to intensive work with the Ministry and representatives of HEIs on the development of new procedures and methodologies for institutional review and the evaluation of fields of study. Importantly, for both study programme evaluation and institutional review, the lower number of procedures carried out did not mean a lower workload for the staff, as during the period when the work of the expert groups and visits were not coordinated, follow-up meetings were organised, thematic analyses and reviews were carried out, and new procedures and methodologies for external evaluation were developed and agreed.

Procedures performed within Lithuania

- *The evaluation of applications for the establishment of higher education institutions (hereinafter referred to as ex-ante institutional review)* is organised when new higher education institutions or

branches of foreign higher education institutions in Lithuania are established at the initiative of natural or legal persons in order to obtain a permit to carry out studies and study-related activities. The assessment under the 6 criteria groups shall start with the evaluation of the new study programmes and, in the case of positive results, proceed to the examination of the remaining 5 parts of the application [1]description of the international level basic and applied research and experimental development and/or professional art activities to be carried out at the university, and the description of the applied research, experimental development and/or professional art activities to be carried out at the college; (2) the intended funding of the activities and commitment to students; (3) the material resources available and expected to be available for the pursuit of the study and research and/or artistic activities; (4) a list of the faculty and other staff members to be recruited for the pursuit of the study and study-related activities and a description of the qualifications and the written intentions of or commitments to participate in the studies and activities related to studies by these persons; and (5) the description of the internal quality assurance system). The new evaluation procedure was established by the Resolution of the Lithuanian Government No 642 of 26/07/2017. The evaluation shall be carried out with the help of local experts. Although the Centre is regularly consulted by various bodies (both local and foreign) intending to establish a private higher education institution in Lithuania, the number of actual applications submitted has been low, with only one such evaluation carried out in the last 5-year period (in 2019). The legislation gives the Centre the exclusive prerogative to organise this type of review, other EQAR registered agencies are not allowed to do so.

- *Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of new study programmes (hereinafter referred to as "ex-ante programme evaluation")* - the objectives of this evaluation are to assess the readiness of a higher education institution to launch a new study programme, its compliance with the requirements of legislation and the provisions of the European Higher Education Area, and to create the preconditions for the development of the study programme and the creation of a quality culture. Applicable to short-cycle, first-cycle and second-cycle study programmes. Covers seven assessment areas [1) study objectives, outcomes and curricula; 2) links between research/arts and study activities; 3) student enrolment and support; 4) studying, study achievement and graduate employment; 5) teaching staff; 6) material resources for studies; 7) management of quality of studies and publicity] and 22 indicators linked to them respectively. Conducted with local experts; only in very rare cases, at the request of HEIs, with foreign experts. These evaluations are carried out on an annual basis, on a demand-driven basis, as requested by HEIs; the evaluation workload remains similar year after year, in the tens of dozens. From 2020 onwards these evaluations are carried out according to the new methodology. This type of evaluation can be carried out by the SKVC or by another agency included in EQAR (so far there has been one such case for the joint EU-Conexus programme for HEIs from six countries, including Lithuania, which are part of the European University Alliance Initiative).
- *The evaluation and accreditation of residency study programmes (hereinafter referred to as "ex-ante evaluation of residency programmes")* can be carried out in two ways: a) a simplified evaluation by the SKVC, when the higher education institution is already implementing studies in the same study field as the new residency study programme proposed; b) an external evaluation by the external expert panel, when the higher education institution is not already implementing studies in the study field as the new residency study programme proposed. During the simplified evaluation of ex-ante residency study programme, the center determines whether the programme complies with the formal requirements of the legal acts. The external evaluation of ex-ante residency study programme includes 5 areas of evaluation: 1) Objectives, results and curricula of residency studies; 2) Study process and evaluation of achievements; 3) Teaching staff; 4) Material resources; 5) Study management and publicity, and 19 indicators related to these areas. Launched in 2020, the evaluations carried out so far are counted in units. Conducted by local experts. This type of assessment can be carried out only by SKVC and not by

another EQAR registered agency. So far, the Centre has carried out several procedures of simplified evaluations of ex-ante residency study programmes.

- The external review and accreditation of higher education institutions and branches of foreign higher education institutions (hereafter referred to as ex-post institutional review of HEIs) has a number of objectives – to determine the quality of the HEI's performance based on the findings of the external evaluation, to create the preconditions for improvement of the HEI's performance, to foster a culture of quality, and to inform the founders, the academic community, and the general public about the quality of the HEI. The performance of HEIs is evaluated according to four assessment areas [1) governance; 2) quality assurance; 3) studies and research/arts activities; 4) impact on regional and national development], and 10 indicators linked to them. Carried out at least every 7 years, by mixed teams of experts (including local and international reviewers). The Centre has the exclusive prerogative to organise this type of evaluation. Since 2020, these reviews are carried out according to the new methodology; completed procedures are counted in single digit units so far.
- The institutional review of performance of higher education institutions in exile (hereafter referred to as the ex-post institutional review of HEIs in exile) is aimed at private HEIs that have found refuge in Lithuania from political persecution. There are four areas of assessment, with the SKVC having responsibility for the first three: 1) governance, 2) quality assurance, 3) studies and research/arts activities, 4) impact on the country and region of origin (the latter is analysed separately by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs); in total, 9 indicators are used. Experts from foreign countries must be involved in this type of review. Currently, one higher education institution, the European Humanities University (established and granted this status in 2019), has the status of a higher education institution in exile, and no external evaluation of it is planned yet. The Centre has the exclusive prerogative to organise this type of evaluation.
- External evaluation and accreditation of study fields (hereinafter - ex-post evaluation of study fields) - is carried out with the aim to assess the quality of the study programme(s) clustered according to the study fields and separate by levels (BA, MA), its compliance with the requirements of the legislation, the provisions of the European Higher Education Area, the commitments of higher education institutions, to create preconditions for the improvement of the study programmes, and to foster a quality culture. The accreditation of fields of study shall be carried out through an assessment of 7 areas [1) study aims, results and curricular; 2) links between scientific/artistic and study activities; 3) student enrolment and support; 4) studies, study achievements and graduate employment; 5) teaching staff; 6) material resources for studies; 7) quality management of studies and publicity], and 24 indicators related to them. It shall be carried out at least once every 7 years. This type of evaluation may be carried out by the SKVC or another agency recognised by EQAR. The SKVC coordinates these procedures involving experts from foreign countries, and almost all procedures are international (except for Lithuanian sign language). Since 2020 these evaluations are carried out according to the new methodology; the number of evaluations carried out is counted in tens so far.
- Ex-post evaluation of medical (including odontology) and veterinary medicine residency studies (hereinafter referred to as "ex-post evaluation of residency studies"). Medical residency is a university-based medical course for graduates who have completed their medical studies (at least six years long, after which a Master's degree and a professional qualification for a doctor was obtained) and wish to specialise in the practice of medicine in accordance with legislation. Veterinary medicine residency are studies in the field of veterinary medicine at the university, intended for persons who have a master's degree in veterinary sciences (or an equivalent higher education qualification) and who wish to acquire a specialization in veterinary medicine. Accreditation of residency studies in medicine and dentistry is based on an evaluation of 5 areas [1) study objectives, results and curricular; 2) study process and evaluation of achievements; 3) teaching staff; 4) material resources of residency studies; and 5)

management of the studies and publicity], and 24 indicators related to them. Currently not implemented, scheduled to start in the first half of 2023 with the evaluation of the veterinary residency. Meanwhile, after consultation with stakeholders, the evaluation of the medical residency has been postponed until further in the future, when all residency studies at two medical universities will be restructured according to the tiered competences model established by the Ministry of Health. It is foreseen to be carried out at least once every 7 years. This type of assessment and accreditation is entrusted exclusively to the SKVC.

Procedures performed abroad

- Ex-post HE institutional review abroad – an evaluation of HEIs abroad by four areas, covering (1) strategic management, (2) studies and lifelong learning, (3) research and experimental development and/or artistic activities, and (4) impact on regional and national development. The evaluation involves experts from foreign countries and all procedures are international. In the last five years, no such evaluations have been carried out abroad. This methodology has not been changed during the evaluation period, it remains the same as in the last ENQA evaluation, when it was considered to be fully ESG compliant.
- Ex-post evaluation of study programmes abroad – the objectives of this evaluation are to assess the quality of the study programme, its compliance with the requirements of the legislation, the provisions of the European Higher Education Area, and the commitments of higher education institutions, and to create the preconditions for the improvement of the study programme and the development of a quality culture. The evaluation of study programmes is carried out by assessing (1) the purpose of the programme and the expected learning outcomes, (2) the structure of the programme, (3) the staff, (4) the material resources, (5) the course of study and its evaluation, and (6) the management of the programme. These six areas of assessment may be supplemented by other and additional criteria relevant to the HEI in accordance with its national regulations. This methodology has not been changed during the evaluation period and remains the same as it was in the last ENQA review of SKVC, when it was considered to be fully compliant with ESG requirements. The number of requests from foreign HEIs to the Centre for evaluation has increased between 2019 and 2021, but the number of evaluations has been small. In the period 2017-2021, the Centre carried out five evaluations of study programmes abroad (all in Ukraine).

Other activities of SKVC as QA agency

- Annual monitoring of fields of study is a new element in the Lithuanian external quality assurance system, introduced in 2018 and carried out for the first time in 2020. Significant deviations may lead the Ministry to initiate an extraordinary external expert evaluation of the field of study at the prior suggestion by SKVC.
- Advice on the application of legislation and regarding the implementation of assessment procedures – the SKVC regularly advises HEIs and all stakeholders on assessment procedures (via email, telephone, on-site visits before and during the pandemic and videoconferencing) and other relevant issues. Representatives of the Centre also appear on television and radio programmes and give interviews to journalists on the topics of higher education, quality improvement and internationalisation. The Centre does not promote specific commercial products or quality systems (such as ISO, EFQM, LEAN, Common Assessment Framework, etc.), and does not offer individual consultancy regarding strategic or managerial solutions. SKVC does not propose and rely on ratings compiled by the commercial media (both foreign and Lithuanian). Recommendations for performance improvement are presented in a generalised form and are based on the results of external evaluations, the Centre's own analyses, and the experience of foreign countries. The only instrument promoted by the Centre is the ESG.

- SKVC as a forum for sharing good practices and international participation - SKVC organises various training events, seminars, discussions and conferences, during which good practices and knowledge are shared, emerging challenges are discussed, and practices of foreign countries are presented, inviting international lecturers and participants not only from Lithuania, but also from other countries. SKVC staff participates in international projects related to the quality assurance of studies (e.g. under Erasmus+, Twinning), and in various international working groups (e.g. on microcredentials). [see more under International Relations and Projects].
- Analytical work and proposals to improve the quality of studies, participation in the legislative process - SKVC regularly collects various statistical data, carries out analyses and overviews after evaluations, participates in various national and international working groups on the quality of studies, and makes proposals to improve the quality of studies. The information and proposals are presented to various stakeholders and higher education policy-making institutions. The Centre is also actively involved in the development and improvement of national legislation on higher education (e.g. the project "Development of the System of Study Regulations" (SKAR-3) updates or develops descriptions of different fields of study, which are used by higher education institutions for the preparation and development of study programmes and by experts in evaluation), involves its staff members in various working groups of the MoE or other institutions, and participates in regular informal consultations on the improvement of legislation. There is no designated unit within SKVC to carry out analytical work, rather it is part of the job profile of regular evaluation coordinators and management.
- Communication and cooperation with different target groups of the SKVC, raising public awareness of the results of the evaluation – both individual consultations and sharing of information and good practices on quality assurance in trainings, seminars, conferences (e.g. annual exhibition "Study and Career"), as well as with pupils', students', teachers', and other organisations is being done. As information on the performance of higher education institutions is useful for prospective and current students, as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public, the aim is to communicate the results of the SKVC's activities and the accumulated knowledge to the widest possible range of stakeholders, which is why all the expert reports are published on the website of the SKVC and newsletters are sent out. Communication with student organisations, schools, foreign communities, relevant authorities and business structures is continuously maintained through a variety of information dissemination channels and tools. Recently, another target audience has been identified, namely quality assurance agencies in other countries. We reach them by sharing messages through the ENQA, CEENQA, INQAAHE newsletters.

Proposals are currently registered in the Parliament and the draft amendment to Law on H&R⁵ on a new funding model for higher education institutions may have an impact on the Centre's future activities. It is envisaged that the funding of research and higher education institutions will be linked to the evaluation of their performance, which will be carried out on the basis of six formal criteria, including (1) the performance of studies; (2) the internationalisation of studies; (3) the recruitment (inclusion) of students into scientific, artistic and study activities; (4) the success of graduates' careers; (5) the accessibility of studies; and (6) the funds obtained by research and higher education institutions from economic entities, non-governmental organisations and individuals in return for orders to carry out studies and under support agreements for the implementation of study activities. The draft delegates that the weighting coefficients of the criteria for the evaluation of the study performance of research and study institutions will be approved by the Government or an institution authorised by it, after taking into account the proposals of the Research Council of Lithuania and

⁵ <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAP/bc8954303cb011ec99bbc1b08701c7f8?positionInSearchResults=1&searchModelUUID=3ffde6fc-3fda-4a25-a05f-2b7edaa2ed92>

the SKVC. It is also stated that the evaluation of the achievements of study activities will be carried out by the Centre in accordance with the procedure laid down by the Government or the body authorised by it.

International relations and projects

The Centre sees internationalisation as an essential feature of its activities and a prerequisite for its success. The SKVC sees itself not only as an active player in the national and regional sphere, but also as a contributor to the quality of higher education in Europe. Therefore, since its foundation, the Centre has been actively involved in international organisations and this is reflected in its membership of five international networks – CEENQA, ENQA, INQAAHE, as well as ENIC and NARIC – both in their activities through various projects and working groups, and in their governance, which is a reflection of the attention paid to international participation and the capacity of the organisation to do so. Membership of the networks and professional links also help to attract competent experts from many foreign countries to participate in evaluations, follow-up activities and events, which is important for fostering the competitiveness of Lithuanian higher education, openness, and collaborative links in EHEA.

SKVC as an organisation is well established, its staff are recognised experts in their field and active internationally.

A 2018 study⁶ commissioned by the European Commission to assess the progress and cooperation in the implementation of quality assurance systems in the European Union (EU) Member States noted that the SKVC was among the top 10 EU Member States in terms by degree centrality measure (social networks) at the time and ranked third.

The Centre has been involved in ENQA activities since 2000, first as an associate member, and since 2012 as a full member, with a high priority and various forms of involvement, e.g. the General Assembly of the ENQA members was organised in 2013 in Lithuania, and the Centre's past and present leaders have served in various capacities, including on the ENQA Board, as experts on several occasions, as speakers, moderators of events, discussion facilitators, and trainers of experts. Ms. Nora Skaburskienė, then Director of the Centre, was a member of the ENQA Council (2017-2018), had experience in assessing quality assurance agencies, and has been invited to speak at various international events. Three SKVC staff members – former Director Ms. Nora Skaburskienė, current Director Mr. Almantas Šerpatauskas and Deputy Director Ms. Aurelija Valeikienė - are in the ENQA database of trained experts, participate in external reviews of other EHEA quality assurance agencies and in expert training. SKVC representative Ms. Aurelija Valeikienė was involved in ENQA's Working Group on Internal Quality Assurance on how ENQA coordinates agency evaluations (2015-2018), and from 2021 to 2023 she is serving on ENQA's Agency Review Committee⁷; in the period 2015-2018 she was a member of the Bologna Secretariat's Working Group on Assisting Belarus to the roadmap to EHEA; and she is currently involved in projects and consultancy work on the quality assurance and recognition of micro-credentials. Mr. Almantas Šerpatauskas, Director of the Centre, was a member of the Board of the Latvian quality agency AIKA (2017-2019), and since March 2021 is an ENQA-nominated member of the Member Selection Committee of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA) of Ukraine, as well as a participant in the work of the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance. Ms. Ieva Vaiciukevičienė, Head of the Legal and General Affairs Department of the Centre, was a member of the Council of Europe's ETINED Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (2016-2020) and is a member of the Accreditation Board of the Kazakh quality agency IQAA (since 2019). Ms. Kristina Sutkutė, Advisor to the Qualifications Evaluation Division, has been involved in the development of the Global Recognition Convention, also has been involved in a number of international projects, and has contributed significantly to the development of the LIREQA Recommendations.

⁶ PPMI, Austrian Institute of Technology, Lukas Bischof Hochschulberatung „Study to evaluate the progress on quality assurance systems in the area of higher education in the Member States and on cooperation activities at European level Final report“, p. 117 http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/80cf98f3-1e01-11e9-8d04-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1

⁷ <https://www.enqa.eu/agency-review-committee/>

On the basis of the ENQA Working Group on Quality Assurance and Recognition, which ran from 2015 to 2017⁸, the SKVC coordinated the LIREQA project consortium of 12 partners in 2016-2019. The main outcome of the LIREQA project is a set of recommendations⁹ linking the activities of quality assurance and recognition of qualifications (and thus the two core functions of the Centre), while meeting the expectations of ESG 1.4. It is a set of recommendations for higher education institutions, quality assessment agencies, ENIC/NARIC centres and other partners. In this way, the Centre takes advantage of its strengths as a multi-functional organisation, allowing it to operate in several areas and to develop relevant innovations. The development of the LIREQA Recommendations has involved a wide range of organisations, including ENIC/NARIC centres, quality agencies, international organisations (ENQA, EUA, ESU), and is a highly innovative product. While it has been observed so far that many quality assurance agencies are struggling with the implementation of ESG 1.4, the LIREQA Recommendations offer practical solutions that are sufficiently detailed but with a level of generality that is appropriate for their widespread application.

Counting from 1995, the Centre coordinated 23 projects and was a partner in 60 projects financed by the European Commission, the European Social Fund, foreign governments, other funds and the Lithuanian state budget.

From 2016 to 2019, the Centre worked as a partner in an ESF-supported project to strengthen the Latvian quality assurance agency AIKA and help it to prepare for ENQA review and to meet the criteria for an EQAR registered agency. With the support of the SKVC, this objective was successfully achieved.

In 2018-2020, the Centre contributed to a Twinning project in Azerbaijan, coordinated by colleagues from the French CIEP (now – France Éducation Internationale), with the aim of strengthening the country's higher education system in line with the common commitments made by EHEA countries.

The Centre is a member of the DEQAR CONNECT¹⁰ project consortium coordinated by EQAR from 2020 to 2022. As a quality agency, SKVC has undertaken to make available in the DEQAR database the expert reports of external quality assessments (on institutions, study programmes, fields of study). To this end, the regulations of the Register of Study Programmes, Curricula and Qualifications (SMPKR) and the Register of Educational and Scientific Institutions (ŠMIR) were updated, and interfaces between the SMPKR, the SKVC website and the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) were developed so that the data from these registers and from the SKVC website on the assessment of programmes of study, study fields and institutional assessment would be reflected in DEQAR. As of December 2021, more than 1,400 evaluation reports have been uploaded to DEQAR.

The international SMART-QUAL project (2020-2022)¹¹ aims to support higher education institutions in implementing an effective internal quality management system. This is achieved by defining a common set of quality indicators to measure, monitor and evaluate the core processes of HEIs (learning and teaching; research; impact on society). These indicators should cover the different decision-making levels of HEIs (strategic, tactical and operational) and define the internal quality management systems of the institutions. The project partners are A3ES, AQU Catalunya and a number of HEIs and other organisations.

In 2021-2022 SKVC will contribute to the implementation of the ESG abroad by providing training on internal and external quality assurance to three Algerian higher education institutions (Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Agronomie d'Alger, ENSA), Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Hydraulique, Blida (ENSH) and Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Biotechnologie Taoufik Khaznadar (ENSB)), as well as by carrying out a pilot external evaluation

⁸ <https://www.enqa.eu/working-groups/>

⁹ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/projects/completed-projects#LIREQA>

¹⁰ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/projects/current-projects#DEQAR>

¹¹ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/projects/current-projects#SMART-QUAL>

of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Agronomie d'Alger (ENSA). These activities are implemented under a service contract with Vytautas Magnus University, coordinator of the Erasmus+ funded project "Internal Quality Assurance System for Higher Education Institutions in Agriculture and Biosystems Engineering in Algeria". Experts from Lithuania and abroad will be used to provide services. The results of the project will not be used for accreditation and will not have any other legal implications, but will provide HEIS and policy makers in higher education and quality assurance in Algeria with relevant recommendations.

During the period from the end of 2021 to the end of 2023, the SKVC is a partner in the EU Twinning project "Further support to the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework" in North Macedonia¹² (a consortium of French, Slovenian and Lithuanian organisations led by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania). Four staff members of the Centre will be involved in international teams as experts for short term missions on quality assurance, improvement of the national qualifications framework and recognition of qualifications.

As mentioned above, the Centre develops its international cooperation through memberships in international networks of quality professionals – ENQA, EQAR, CEENQA, INQAAHE, as well as participation in joint projects and partnerships with similar organisations in other countries. Communication with our closest Baltic neighbours – the Latvian (AIKA) and Estonian (EKKA) quality agencies – is taking place through the exchange of experience at annual meetings, nominations of experts, participation in joint projects, etc. Unfortunately, the last physical meeting was organised by the SKVC in Lithuania in 2019, and due to the pandemic, the meeting moved to virtual space in 2020, while it was abandoned altogether in 2021, with the hope of organising a physical meeting again in 2022 if the situation improves. Cooperation with the Nordic Quality Agencies (NOQA Network) has also intensified over the last five years, through joint biennial meetings, targeted visits to discuss relevant issues, and through the Nordic Council of Ministers' Networking in Public Administration programme.

SKVC has bilateral cooperation agreements with ten quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area. It should be noted that not all bilateral relations are limited to these agreements, but more activities are taking place. For example, between 2016 and 2021 we have received visiting delegations from Algeria, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, we have had remote meetings with representatives from Indonesia, Cambodia, and Sakartvelo, respectively. We have responded favourably to invitations from all agencies to propose experts for assessments.

SKVC is taking a broader leadership role in Europe, therefore has initiated a dialogue with EQAR and ENQA, as well as the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) and the National Committee on Foreign Medical Education and Accreditation (NCFMEA) in the USA, in order to achieve recognition of European QA agencies at the global level and in North America. Unfortunately, consultations over the last few years have not yielded the desired outcome. In view of this, the Centre plans to apply and undergo additional review procedures in order to become a WFME accredited quality agency and to be recognised by NCFMEA. This recognition of SKVC will allow the Centre to award an additional quality label to Lithuanian universities providing medical studies through an external evaluation. This in turn will help these higher education institutions to be globally competitive and attractive to foreign students choosing to study medicine in Lithuania and to Lithuanian medical graduates wishing to practice in the USA and Canada and to conduct research activities.

The SKVC consistently develops its internationalisation through its main activities as a quality agency: a foreign academic participates in the Council of the Centre, more than 90% of the evaluation teams are international, including both foreign and Lithuanian experts and student representatives. International experts in their fields are also invited to participate in various conferences organised by the Centre each year, as described below.

¹² <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/projects/current-projects#EU%20Twinning%20Project%20%E2%80%9CFurther%20support%20to%20the%20implementation%20of%20the%20National%20Qualifications%20Framework%E2%80%9C%20in%20North%20Macedonia>

- On 13 June 2017, the Centre organised a seminar on "Improving study programmes based on student feedback". It was addressed to the staff of higher education institutions responsible for the quality of studies – improvement of study programmes by collecting and analysing student feedback and implementing the recommendations made by experts. At the event, Dr. Karl Ledermüller (Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria) and Dr. Vanja Perovšek (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), together with her assistant Mr. Jaka Kovac, presented a case study on student engagement in quality improvement and presented the results of a study carried out to assess the collection and use of student feedback for quality improvement. The workshop was of a unique interactive format and received excellent feedback.
- "20 years after the Sorbonne Declaration: the Bologna Process in Lithuania and other European countries". The event took place on 11 June 2018 and was aimed at discussing the overall European higher education reforms carried out since 1999 under the so-called Bologna Process, assessing progress in general and the situation in Lithuania in particular. Speakers included Mr. David Crosier (Higher Education Policy Coordinator (EACEA) and co-author of the Bologna Process Implementation Report), Dr. Una Strand Viðarsdóttir (member of the Bologna Follow-up Group and Senior Adviser at the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture), Ms. Anna Gover (representative of the European University Association), Mr. Anne Flierman (member of the ENQA Board). This was followed by a roundtable discussion with representatives of Lithuanian higher education social stakeholders.
- On 28 November 2018, the Centre organised a seminar on "Quality Assurance in Times of Change". The event focused on the management of quality processes in times of major reforms (institutional mergers). Dr. Virginijus Lepeška (Founder and Chairman of the Board of OVC Consulting, who has consulted various Lithuanian HEIs on strategic management and implementation of change) participated in the seminar, while the experience of Scandinavian countries was presented by Associate Professor Dr. Goeran Melin (Technopolis Sweden), who also led the interactive part of the seminar. Other speakers included Dr. Paulius Baltrušaitis (Kauno Kolegija, Lithuania), Mr. Marcel Tarbier (European Students' Union, Germany-Sweden), Mr. Paulius Baltokas (LAMA BPO, Lithuania). This was followed by a panel discussion with representatives of higher education institutions.
- The conference "Linking Academic Recognition and Quality Assurance Systems" was held on 22 May 2019. Presentations were given by Mr. Adam Gajek (President of the European Students' Union, Poland), Ms. Tia Loukkola (Director of Institutional Development, European University Association, Belgium), Mr. Gunnar Vaht (President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee), Ms. Aurelija Valeikienė, SKVC Deputy Director and LIREQA Project Coordinator. The afternoon was filled by a discussion on recommendations for HEIs, quality agencies and ENIC/NARIC centres and group work.
- On 11 December 2019, the SKVC organised an international conference "Quality, Accountability and Transparency in Higher Education". The event was addressed to higher education institutions' leadership (rectors, directors, vice-rectors for studies, international relations, strategic development) and middle management (heads of studies and international affairs departments), as well as to representatives of students' and other educational organisations. In the first conference part presentation were made by Prof. Modestas Gelbūda (Professor, ISM University of Management and Economics, founder of the Baltic Institute for Leadership Development, Lithuania); Dr. Ellen Hazelkorn (Professor Emerita, University of Technology, Dublin, Ireland, higher education policy researcher and consultant); Dr. Maria Manatos (Lecturer, Department of Social, Political and Territorial Sciences, University of Aveiro, Portugal, Researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CIPES)); Mr. Eigirdas Sarkanass, (President of the Lithuanian Students' Union, Lithuania); Dr. Thomas Weko, (Senior Analyst, Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD, Head of the Higher Education Policy Unit). The second part of the event included a discussion involving representatives of higher education institutions, students, the Ministry, the Council for Higher Education, and SKVC.

- The Centre organised its first international distance conference entitled "Implementing Quality Distance Learning" on 15 December 2020. The opening keynote speeches were delivered by international guests Dr Chris Brink (Professor Emeritus, former Rector of Newcastle University, UK), Dr Tony Bates (President and CEO of Tony Bates Associates Ltd, Canada), Dr Piet Van Hove (Director of International Relations at the University of Antwerp, Belgium), and Mr Ben Walker (Senior Lecturer at the Manchester Metropolitan University Teaching Academy, UK). The speakers from Lithuania included Dr. Airina Volungevičienė (Director of the Institute of Innovative Studies, Vytautas Magnus University), Dr. Loreta Tauginienė (Ombudswoman for Academic Ethics and Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania), and Mr. Eigirdas Sarkanais (President of the Lithuanian Students' Union). Traditionally, a roundtable discussion followed involving representatives of higher education institutions and student organisations.
- A second international teleconference on "The Development of External Quality Assurance to Remain Fit for Purpose" was held on 14 December 2021. In the first part of the conference, presentations were made by Dr. Susanna Karakhanyan (7th President of INQAAHE, Armenia - United Arab Emirates), Mr. Jakub Grodecki (Vice President of the European Students' Union, Poland); Dr. Daniela Cristina Ghițulică (Vice President of ENQA, Vice-President of ARACIS, Romania); Dr. Don F. Westerheijden (Researcher Emeritus, Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, The Netherlands); Dr. Eugenijus Stumbrys (Head of the Science Policy and Analysis Division, Lithuanian Research Council); Mr. Vytautas Kučinskas (President of the Lithuanian Students' Union, member of the SKVC Council). As usual, the second part – the round table discussion – was addressed to stakeholders in higher education and included representatives of universities, colleges, students, employers, the Ministry, LMT, and SKVC.

4. ACTIVITIES OF SKVC IN COMPLIANCE TO ESG PART 3 (PROFILE AND MANNER OF FUNCTIONING)

4.1 ESG 3.3 INDEPENDENCE

Standard: Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

Guidelines:

Autonomous institutions need independent agencies as counterparts.

In considering the independence of an agency the following are important:

- Organisational independence, demonstrated by official documentation (e.g. instruments of government, legislative acts or statutes of the organisation) that stipulates the independence of the agency's work from third parties, such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organisations;
- Operational independence: the definition and operation of the agency's procedures and methods as well as the nomination and appointment of external experts are undertaken independently from third parties such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholders;
- Independence of formal outcomes: while experts from relevant stakeholder backgrounds, particularly students, take part in quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

Anyone contributing to external quality assurance activities of an agency (e.g. as expert) is informed that while they may be nominated by a third party, they are acting in a personal capacity and not representing their constituent organisations when working for the agency. Independence is important to ensure that any procedures and decisions are solely based on expertise.

Organisational independence

The SKVC is an independent budgetary organisation that implements the Lithuanian state policy on higher education and research within the limits of its competence and ensures the compatibility of the Lithuanian higher education system with the provisions of the European Higher Education Area. The Centre was established on 24 January 1995, following the signing of an order by the then Minister of Education on the establishment of the SKVC as a separate legal entity. The Centre's Statutes have been approved by order of the Minister of Education and Science and have not been revised since the last ENQA review of SKVC.

Since 1995, the Centre's main activities have remained the same: as a national quality assurance agency for higher education and as a centre for academic information and recognition of qualifications obtained abroad. Depending on the legal structure of the state, the task of drafting documents regulating a particular field is given to the SKVC either by legislation approved by the LRV or the MoE. The main tasks of the SKVC, as defined in the Law on H&R and the Statutes of the organisation, are as follows:

- Encouraging higher education institutions to improve the quality of their performance and foster a culture of quality through external evaluation and accreditation;

The mission of the SKVC is to contribute to the improvement of the quality of studies through mutual accountability and the promotion of a culture of quality, and to create the conditions for the free movement of persons around the world through the development of the transparency and realisation of the value of qualifications.

- Creation of favourable conditions for the free movement of persons through the assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications and the provision of information.

Since 2002, the Centre has been a public administration institution subject to strict legal regulation and control in accordance with the Law on Public Administration, the Law on the Civil Service, the Law on State Budget Structure, the Law on Public Procurement, the Law on the State Language and other national legislation. The Centre's internal working procedures are governed by the Rules of Procedure, the regulations of the relevant divisions and various rules in the field, such as the Information Security Policy Package, the Customer Service Standard, the rules on simplified public procurement, etc. Thus, the framework and modalities of the SKVC are clearly and unambiguously set out.

The SKVC acts as an independent and autonomous institution while evaluation the quality of studies, taking full responsibility for its own activities and the consequences of those activities. The independence of the institution is demonstrated by organisational independence, operational independence, independence of formal decision-making, also by the tradition of communication with social stakeholders.

SKVC both *de jure* and *de facto* acts as an independence quality assurance agency.

In particular, the independence of the SKVC is ensured by the governance structure of the institution: the Centre is led by a single-managerial governing body – the Director (reporting both to the Council of SKVC and the Minister), and a collegial governing body made up of the representatives of stakeholders in higher education – the Council of SKVC (Council)¹³.

According to the Law on H&R, the Council is composed of 11 members. One member of the Council of the Centre for Quality Assessment of Studies is nominated by the Committee on Education and Science of the Seimas and the Minister of Education and Science, two members are nominated by the organisations uniting universities and colleges, four members are nominated by the organisations uniting the stakeholders, and one member of the Council is nominated by the organisation uniting students, for a term of 2 years. A member of the Council delegated by the Seimas Committee on Education and Science must be an international expert living and working outside the Republic of Lithuania. The composition of the Council of SKVC shall be announced by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport. The current composition of the Council of the SKVC was approved by Order No V-394 of 19 June 2020. It stipulates that the period of the current Council's activity will last until 6 January 2022. In view of the need for continuity during the transition period, the Centre and the Council have requested the Ministry to extend the mandate of the present Council during the present ENQA review.

The Council is made up of representatives from different institutions and organisations, including representatives from academia, employers and students. As said, the composition of the Council is formally announced by the Minister, but the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson of the Council are elected by the members. The Council operates in accordance with its own approved rules of procedure and on the basis of the principles of collegiality (issues are prepared, discussed and then voted on) and publicity (both work plans and activity reports are published). The Council normally holds at least one meeting per quarter, but may meet more frequently as required. Even before the pandemic, some Council meetings were held remotely, but since spring 2020, only virtual meetings have been organised and the frequency of meetings has not deviated from the normal rhythm of work. The Council is not dominated by political considerations or economic interests; its members are required to declare their interests publicly. The Council has a secretary who is an employee of the Centre.

The members of the Council shall participate in the election of the Director of the Centre, consider and approve the vision and mission of the Centre, the strategic plan submitted by the Director, consider and make proposals

¹³ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/about/council>

on the Centre's annual activity plans, approve the Centre's annual activity report, and carry out the other functions set out in the Statutes¹⁴.

In accordance with the Law on H&R, the Director of the SKVC is elected by public competition for a term of 4 years. The selection panel shall be composed of at least half of the members of the Council of the Centre, the others represent the Founder and the Civil Service Department. The same person may not be appointed as Director for more than two consecutive terms. The Director shall organise the activities of the institution: perform all administrative functions of the institution, issue legal acts, represent the institution, take care of the intellectual, material and financial resources of the Centre, ensure the rational and economical use of its funds and assets, and carry out the other functions laid down in the Statutes. Since 2011, there have been three public competitions for the post of Director of the Centre, each with several or even more than a dozen candidates from both inside and outside the organisation, and the persons selected for the post have been from both outside and inside the organisation respectively.

We welcome the Centre's dual accountability to the Ministry and to the Council, which is made up of the stakeholders of higher education. This set up contributes to the transparency and visibility of the Centre's activities, helps to represent different interests and to balance different points of view in dialogue for the common good. Furthermore, this governance model of the SKVC meets the requirements of ESG 3.1 on the involvement of social stakeholders in the governance of the organisation, and correlates with good governance practices of many quality agencies in the European Higher Education Area. It is doubtful whether any single quality agency can be totally independent – all are dependent on their founders and funders (especially in a market environment). The real question is therefore about mechanisms for the alignment of interests, transparent and defined organisation of work and impartial decision-making. Moreover, for all quality agencies, the relevance of their activities and results to the context and to the local concept of quality is crucial – the legitimacy of quality assurance depends heavily on its relevance. On the other hand, there is also a clear role for agencies in helping to keep in mind common European commitments in the local context, primarily in the context of ESG, but also in the context of the other agreements in the Bologna Process, and this international dimension in the work of quality agencies also contributes to the autonomy of their activities and to the consistency with international good practice.

The Centre selects its staff by means of open competitions, in accordance with the procedures laid down for the civil service or for employment relationships in the public sector. The Centre shall ensure that public and private interests are balanced and shall not employ persons related by close family ties. An audit carried out by the Ministry of Transport and Communications and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (2018-2019) concluded that the Centre has zero level of nepotism. All civil servants declare their interests, income and assets.

Operational independence

The Centre is a public administration institution operating within a hierarchical system of state institutions, so SKVC is as independent as this system and the laws allow. The Law on Public Administration¹⁵ stipulates that all institutions shall be guided by the principles of accountability for decisions taken; *non reformatio in peius*, efficiency, rule of law, comprehensiveness, equity, innovation and openness to change, non-abuse of power, objectivity, proportionality, transparency, subsidiarity, serving customers in a „single window“ manner. It should be noted that the Law on H&R stipulates that the state policy on higher education and research shall be formulated by the Seimas, the Government, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and other ministries within the competence established in this and other laws and regulations (Article 14(1)); and the SKVC is

¹⁴ https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/269_9b604a2c309533bc5d70f58444606383.pdf

¹⁵ <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/09ebba107b9311e49386e711974443ff?jfwid=rivwzvpvg>

classified as one of the institutions implementing the policy (in accordance with the competence established in the Law on H&R and other laws and regulations) (Article 14(2)).

The Centre organises its own activities and takes care of the necessary resources. The SKVC is registered as a separate legal entity (legal entity code No 111959192, legal form – budgetary institution), has bank accounts in its own name, and has a coat of arms with the state symbol of the Vytis. The Centre's logo, the so-called 'golden section', based on the Fibonacci sequence of numbers with the abbreviation of the organisation's name, is patented. The Centre is not subject to VAT and is not a direct manager of state budget appropriations, but receives its funds through its Founder. The Centre rents state-owned premises (managed by the state-owned company Turto bankas), which are separate from the Founder, higher education institutions or business structures. Some information resources (e.g., computer licences) are provided centrally through the National Agency for Education, and there are plans for more centralisation of IT procurement nationwide in the future, a trend that is not unique to the education sector.

The independence of the SKVC as an institution, within the limits set by the public administration, is demonstrated by national and internal legislation: the Law on H&R identifies us as a part of the higher education system, responsible for external evaluation and accreditation; the competence of the Centre is defined to a separate Article 22 of the Law, the Centre's activities are regulated in more detail in the Statutes, the structure of the Centre is adopted, and every employee has a job description. Legislation at various levels clearly describes the actors, stages, timeframes and other circumstances of the evaluation process, thus providing a solid basis for uniform interpretation and practice. When necessary, the legislation is revised.

SKVC values are professionalism, impartiality, openness, and cooperation.

Both during the previous institutional review cycle and in the current one, the establishment of the evaluation plan is the prerogative of the Ministry, and there have been no changes in this respect. The original review plan was based on the results of previous reviews, and has subsequently been adjusted in the light of this Government's work programme and plans to clarify the missions of the different types of HEIs. The Centre was formerly responsible for the development of the ex-post study programmes evaluation plan; it now develops (and adjusts as necessary) the plan for assessment of study fields. All plans are made public in advance.

According to the Description of the Selection of Experts, approved by an order of the Director of the SKVC, the Centre selects experts for the evaluation autonomously from HEIs, MoE and other governing bodies, thus making the selection of experts independent from third parties. It is important to note that all experts performing the assignment are required to complete the Declaration of Interests of the Expert and the Non-Disclosure Agreement provided by the SKVC, indicating their potential conflict of interest and if there are any circumstances which may hinder the expert's ability to be impartial and to carry out the assignment in an objective manner. The HEIs shall also have the right to request the replacement of the member(s) of the panel if they provide evidence of bias on the part of the expert. Each such request, which are numerous per year, are examined by a permanent internal commission which shall assess the circumstances and advise the Director of the Centre on the need to replace the expert; the HEIs are informed of the outcome of each request. For example, between 2017 and 2021, 15 requests from HEIs were received for the replacement of an expert panel member. After examining these requests in an *Ad hoc* Commission, the Centre rejected the requests nine times on the grounds that the HEI did not provide facts demonstrating a possible conflict of interest and bias and unsuitable qualifications of the experts, and four times replaced or withdrew the expert panel member, taking into account the HEI's arguments, and partially granted two requests by enlarging the panel with a new member.

Independence of formal outcomes

In order to ensure the quality of the Centre's decision-making and to implement the principle of consultation with social partners, the SKVC has three advisory bodies¹⁶: the Higher Education Institutions Review Commission (AMVK), the Study Assessment Commission (SVK), and the Appeals Commission of the Centre (AK). The AMVK and the SVK consider the validity of the conclusions prepared by experts and advise the Director of the Centre on their quality, while the AK is a pre-judicial body for the disputes concerning external evaluation, it deals with appeals submitted by a higher education institution to the Centre against the Centre's decisions concerning the external review of the activities of higher education institutions in the Republic of Lithuania, branches of foreign higher education institutions in the Republic of Lithuania, and the decisions of the Centre concerning study programmes, fields of study, application documents to obtain the license for the conduct of studies or activities related to the studies. All these commissions are established with the involvement of stakeholders – representatives of higher education institutions, students, employers – their composition are rotated, their working regulations and composition is made public on the Centre's website.

Accreditation decisions are made independently of the opinion of the MoE or HEIs, on the basis of the evaluation judgements (evaluation reports) drawn up by the experts, and after hearing the opinion of the SVK or the AMVK on the validity of the conclusions. The Centre protects its reputation and strives to remain impartial and objective at all times.

Cases concerning the protection of students' interests and urgent quality improvement measures following a non-accreditation decision shall be discussed in separate meetings and proposals for extending the accreditation period are formulated.

It is important that the individual administrative legal acts of the SKVC as an institution concerning the evaluation of study programmes are not appealed to political or management institutions, but to independent pre-trial institutions and courts: the Appeals Commission of SKVC, they also can be contested filing cases to the Supreme Administrative Disputes Commission, the Vilnius Regional Administrative Court, the Supreme Administrative Court of Lithuania.

Consultations with the MoE, the SKVC Council and the stakeholders are an important part of the Centre's work, but in accordance with the principles of public administration, the final decision is taken by the SKVC Director, who is responsible for the organisation's performance.

As part of the process of creating an anti-corruption working environment, the SKVC has adopted a 'zero' gifts policy and has updated the Description of the Procedure for the Declaration, Coordination and Control of Public and Private Interests at the Centre and its annexes – the lists of positions where persons are obliged to declare their private interests and the lists of positions with administrative powers. SKVC has established an anti-corruption environment and has paid particular attention to this in the last two years: a person responsible for the prevention of corruption has been appointed, internal training has been organised, staff have been encouraged to participate in external training regularly held by public sector organisations, analyses of the likelihood of corruption have been carried out and measures have been taken¹⁷.

4.2 ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard: Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

¹⁶ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/about/advisory>

¹⁷ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/prevention-of-corruption>

Guidelines: It is in the public interest that agencies are adequately and appropriately funded, given higher education's important impact on the development of societies and individuals. The resources of the agencies enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance activities in an effective and efficient manner. Furthermore, the resources enable the agencies to improve, to reflect on their practice and to inform the public about their activities.

Staff

Since its establishment in 1995, the Centre has grown from 3 to 39 people by 2021. Most of the staff of the SKVC are civil servants, while others work on projects on fixed-term contracts. As the SKVC has two main functions, the structure of the Centre comprises the Study Evaluation Division and the Institutional Review Division (both of which perform the functions of a quality assurance agency), the Qualifications Assessment Division (which performs the functions of Lithuanian ENIC/NARIC), and a Legal and General Affairs Division. The Centre also employs two finance specialists who are not attached to any unit. The organisational structure of the Centre is available on its website¹⁸. There is an annual assignment and performance appraisal of all staff, a staff motivation scheme covering both financial and non-financial measures, social responsibility promoted and various campaigns organised. Hygiene and occupational safety are given particular attention during the pandemic period and additional measures are taken to this end. It should be noted that, although the move to 100% teleworking posed some organisational and technical challenges, none of the Centre's activities were interrupted by the Covid-19 situation, and there was not a single working day's downtime. Procedures for both internal work organisation and external quality evaluation were adopted and updated for the pandemic.

The majority of the Centre's staff are civil servants (27 in total) and their number is determined by the Founder on the basis of the overall maximum number of staff provided by the Government for a given area of governance (in this case – education). Since the ENQA review in 2017, the number of posts established by the Centre has remained the same. Some of the Centre's staff are employed on a contract basis in various projects, which helps to regulate the workload and provide the human and financial resources needed to carry out the functions. Regular external quality assessment activities are planned several years in advance, so that the resources required for the evaluations are known in advance.

As of 01/12/2021, the Centre had 37 staff members, 14 of whom are QA agency staff, 11 of whom are employed by the Lithuanian ENIC/NARIC Centre, and the remainder are administrative staff and project staff. The total number of staff working at the Centre decreased slightly between 2017 and 2021: 44 in 2017, 37 in 2018, 37 in 2019, 35 in 2020 and 37 in 2021. The factor contributing to the decrease in staff numbers in 2018 is due to the fact that, following the completion of the evaluation of the study programmes in 2018 and the preparation for the start of the evaluation of the study fields, the main focus of the work was on the preparation of the evaluation procedures, and there was no need to recruit any new staff due to the reduction in workload. With the increase in evaluation activities from 2020 onwards, another factor affecting staffing levels is the uncompetitive salaries for entry-level positions compared to business and other organisations in the field of education and public administration.

The number of staff involved in external quality assurance activities in the Study Evaluation Division and the Institutional Review Division is variable. The number of civil servants performing this function is 11. The other staff members are the project's staff, who act as evaluation coordinators, as well as the civil servants in the above-mentioned units. As of 01/12/2021, the Centre's AMIS-3 project, which is devoted to quality evaluation and related activities, had 4 staff members. The number of evaluation coordinators working on the project may increase. However, the unattractive salary rates set by the European Social Fund Agency (ESFA) are a barrier to more recruitment. This has been particularly the case over the last two years, when the pay rate for project-based activity staff has remained stable, while it has increased in private business. Uncompetitive salaries make it difficult for the

The role of evaluation coordinator is carried out by both civil servants and project staff.

¹⁸ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/about/structure>

Centre to attract new staff while ensuring optimal staffing levels for its activities. The Centre's initiation of talks with the ESFA to review the fixed fee has so far been unsuccessful, as the methodology for calculating the fixed fee is based on averaging the salaries of organisations in the education sector, and does not take into account the complexity of the SKVC's activities (such as the need to be familiar with legislation in the field of public administration, public procurement, regulation of higher education, have good command of the English language, and have excellent general competencies, such as being organised, mindful of intercultural communication, etc). In order to better manage the organisational and internal culture factors that the Centre depends on, an anonymous survey of staff leaving the organisation was launched in 2021. The sample size of the survey was too small to make far-reaching generalizations, but the overall results of the survey correlate with the anonymous survey of all staff conducted at the end of 2021.

On average, 1 member of the Study Assessment Unit organises the work of 4 teams of experts per year to arrange ex-post evaluation of study fields. In addition, the staff is responsible for coordinating the evaluation of new study programmes submitted by HEIs (which can be submitted at any time, but peak in the spring, in preparation for student enrolment).

As mentioned above, the Centre's main field of activity is the institutional of Lithuanian higher education institutions and evaluation of their study programmes. However, we do not shy away from the evaluation of foreign higher education institutions or their study programmes. Every year, the SKVC receives questions from various foreign higher education institutions regarding external quality evaluation. As this is an additional activity for the Centre, we undertake it only after assessing our own capacity and, as set out in ESG 3.6, taking into account the status and reputation of the requesting HEIs, and therefore we have only carried out a few evaluations of foreign HEIs.

The Institutional Review Division foresees that 1 member of staff will organise on average 4-5 expert teams to evaluate the performance of HEIs during the period 2021-2023. Staff in this unit usually have the additional task of organising scrutiny of applications for the establishment of new HEIs for the licensing purposes. These activities are not regular and not planned in advance, but do not represent a substantial increase in workload. As already mentioned, the SCVC has evaluated only one application for the establishment of a higher education institution in the last 5 years, although requests for advice on the establishment of HEIs are received every year.

Given the specific nature of the work of the SKVC – the environment and complexity of its activities, the autonomy required in its work – it is a requirement that all staff performing the function of the Centre's quality agency have a university degree. As of July 2021, the highest number of staff members had completed postgraduate university studies with a Master's degree or equivalent (level 7 according to the LTQF and the EQF) (9 people), 4 staff members have a Bachelor's degree or equivalent (level 6 according to the LTQF and the EQF), and 1 staff member has a Doctorate degree (level 8 according to the LTQF and the EQF).

Each new staff member joining the Centre receives training to familiarise him/her with the SKVC as an organisation, its values, its strategy, its core functions, its working procedures, public procurement, protection of personal data, and the activities of its divisions. The introduction of the unit in which the new staff member starts shall be given the highest priority in order to give the staff member a thorough understanding of the tasks ahead. The new recruit observes the evaluations organised by a more experienced member of staff before he/she starts to coordinate external evaluations on his/her own.

The Centre provides opportunities for professional development for all staff. Each year, staff members participate in various training courses, seminars and conferences. All training courses organised by the Centre are identified according to the needs expressed by staff and managers, and are tailored to the target group. Some of the training is compulsory in accordance with civil service requirements (e.g. prevention of corruption, management of public and private interests).

The way of competence development / # of events / year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Common internal training to staff	3	6	7	4	6
External professional development events	11	10	7	14	18

5 table. Number of staff professional development events in 2017-2021.

The Centre's internal communication is also continuously strengthened. Currently, regular staff awareness is ensured through weekly all-staff joint meetings, every other day management meetings, every 1-2 weeks Quality Agency meetings, various events, etc. In addition, the Legal Officer prepares and disseminates daily overviews of legislation relevant to the Centre's activities; the Public Relations Officer monitors the media and distributes periodic educational news to all staff members by e-mail. Informal team-building events are organised at least once a month. During the pandemic period, additional attention was paid to mental health aspects such as self-help and peer support.

There is a high turnover of staff in the QA agency, mainly due to personal reasons (e.g. maternity leave), young age of the staff, and self-development (e.g. pursuit of a master's degree or PhD; moving from the public sector to the private sector; moving to work in higher education institutions). Although there are not many vertical career opportunities in the SKVC, it should be noted that the current positions of Director of the Centre, Head of the Study Evaluation Division, Adviser to the Study Evaluation Division, Head of the Institutional Review Division, are all staff members of the Centre, who have been promoted by competition or after an extraordinary evaluation, and have been long-standing members of the Centre. Although staff turnover has an impact on the performance of functions, risks are managed and activities are carried out according to established plans. However, in the period 2020-2021, there are greater challenges in attracting new staff, both because of the pandemic and because of the rigidity of pay, which has recently started to lag significantly behind that offered in the private sector in the public administration. It should be noted that other budgetary institutions in Lithuania are also experiencing the same situation. In order to address the problems of staff salaries and staff turnover and recruitment, the Centre has discussed them with the Council of the SKVC and with the Ministry, which provides funding for the Centre. At the end of 2021, a decision was taken to pay part of the salary of the staff working in the project from the state budget, thus offering a more attractive salary. The extent to which this will work and help attract new staff will become clear in the first half of 2022.

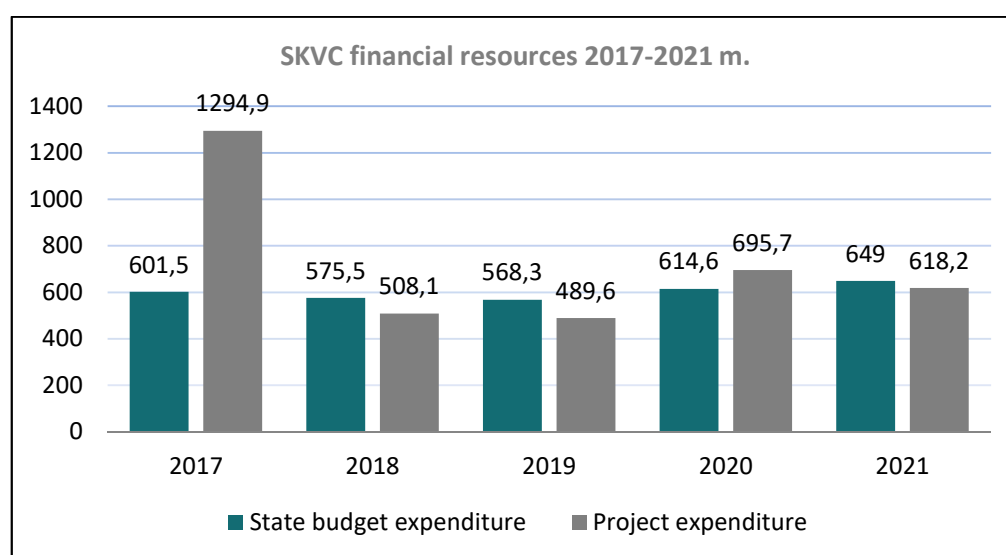
Financial resources

The SKVC is financed from the State budget of the Republic of Lithuania: annual appropriations from the State budget and EU Structural Fund projects allocated by the State on a multi-annual basis. The Centre also receives funding through participation in various national and international projects and external evaluations abroad. The Centre's annual budget is adopted for one year together with the overall State budget. The State budget resources received by the Centre shall be used to cover the salaries of the Centre's staff and civil servants, the purchase of economic and administrative services, and to meet its maintenance needs. State budget funds are allocated annually in accordance with the Law on Budget Structure of the Republic of Lithuania. As a general rule, the State appropriations for the following year are based on the previous year's appropriations. They are increased only in exceptional cases (e.g. in the event of a change from the management of premises on a usufruct basis to the renting of premises and the provision of additional funding for the payment of premises rent). It should be noted that in the event of additional needs, the Centre applies to the Ministry for additional funds, which allocates such funds on the basis of an estimate submitted by the Centre to cover the need for additional funds.

The costs for external quality assessments are financed by EU Structural Funds projects. The budget for these projects is planned for the entire duration of the project, usually 3 years. This model guarantees the timely financing of activities. So far, the funds foreseen in the projects have been fully sufficient to finance the external quality assessment activities. The AMIS-3 project (continuation of AMIS and AMIS-2 projects) is

currently being implemented by the SCVC and is scheduled to run until September 2023. However, the external evaluation of the fields of study is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2025 and the institutional evaluations are scheduled to be completed by the beginning of 2024. As the external evaluation cycle is longer than the ongoing EU project and the funds will not be sufficient to complete all evaluations, the SKVC has already informed both the Council and the Ministry of the situation in 2020 and also in 2021, and has discussed possible sources of funding.

In 2017, the Centre's project funding costs were twice as high as the share of the budgeted funds. As of 2018, the share of project funding costs has significantly decreased, while the share of budgeted state funding has remained stable. This is due to the fact that, following the completion of the ex-post evaluation of study programmes in 2017, new evaluation procedures were being developed for both the evaluation of fields of study and institutional review, so that in principle only evaluations of new study programmes (ex-ante study programmes) were carried out regularly. With the start of the new cycle of the evaluation of study fields and institutional reviews from 2020, the share of project costs has started to increase again and will represent a significant part of the Centre's expenditure until 2023.



1 graph. Expenditure of SKVC in 2017-2021 m. thous. eur. Source: statistical data of SKVC. Preliminary data for 2021.

In response to the needs expressed by SKVC to the Founder of the Centre, the funding from the State budget for 2022 has been increased.

The Centre's operational, financial and economic activities shall be controlled by the authorised state authorities in accordance with the procedure laid down by the laws and regulations of the Republic of Lithuania. Separate from other activities, the Centre's projects are regularly audited. No material weaknesses were identified during any of the inspections or audits.

Infrastructure

The headquarters of the SKVC are located in Vilnius, in Alberto Goštauto street, house number 12. The premises have been transferred to the Centre for management and use free of charge until 2021, and only the maintenance costs of these premises are to be paid from the funds managed by the Centre. Since 2021, the same premises have been rented. Despite the change in the basis of the use of the premises, this has not changed anything in principle, as the manager of the premises has remained the same both before and now, namely the State Enterprise Turto bankas. The premises currently managed by the Centre are located on one

floor of one building, which is convenient. All the offices are located in one wing of the building with a separate internal entrance, which allows for easy and quick communication and creates a community atmosphere in the institution. The total area of the Centre is 890,79 sq. m. The Centre has a total of 22 working rooms, a lounge and a kitchenette. Staff in managerial positions usually have their own offices, while other staff members usually work in the offices in groups of 2 or in some cases 3. The practice of teleworking, which was introduced well before the pandemic, has allowed for considerable flexibility to work outside the office. We are considering expanding teleworking beyond the pre-pandemic period after the pandemic ends.

There are also 3 rooms available for meetings of expert panels, commissions, working groups, small seminars and other events. In exceptional cases, the Centre makes arrangements with neighbouring organisations and has access to the working rooms of other institutions under the Ministry in the same building free of charge.

All workplaces of the Centre are equipped with an internal computer network. The Centre also has a wireless Internet connection to meet the needs of external users (e.g. experts). The Centre's staff can connect to the internal network of the SKVC via a secure connection and work on a file server, accessing work documents from anywhere in the world with an internet connection. This has been particularly helpful for the smooth transition to remote working in a pandemic situation.

The SKVC has sufficient physical resources to operate; care is taken to improve or update them periodically, although the specificities of the public sector do not allow for a particularly rapid response and renewal. However, in line with the needs, the Centre has made additional purchases in 2020 of laptops, conferencing equipment and tools for more interactive organisation of business events. To support the Centre's remote work during the pandemic, as well as the remote visits for the external evaluation, the Centre purchased three ZOOM videoconferencing software licences. In the event of an unforeseen need for simultaneous interpretation, the Centre was given the opportunity by the Ministry.

It can be stated that the Centre has sufficient resources to meet the necessary needs. Of course, the Centre's resources are not the most up-to-date and do not provide ideal working conditions. However, they are sufficient for the current functions and, where necessary, with the help of the Founder and project funds, they are gradually being modernised and ensure the proper performance of the functions.

However, the situation regarding the adequacy of the financial resources of the SKVC, as well as the proportionality of the staff for both quality assurance and other statutory functions, is not straightforward and is therefore in the focus of constant attention of the SKVC management and the Council, and is discussed regularly with the Founder.

5. ACTIVITIES OF SKVC IN COMPLIANCE TO ESG PART 2

Below is the assessment by SKVC of our compliance with each standard of the ESG Part 2 and the developments that took place since the second external ENQA review.

5.1 ESG 2.1 CONSIDERATION OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standard: External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

Guidelines: Quality assurance in higher education is based on the institutions' responsibility for the quality of their programmes and other provision; therefore it is important that external quality assurance recognises and supports institutional responsibility for quality assurance. To ensure the link between internal and external quality assurance, external quality assurance includes consideration of the standards of Part 1. These may be addressed differently, depending on the type of external quality assurance.

The Law on H&R and ESG state that the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with the HEI itself, and that the mission of the QA agency is to help HEIs to fulfil their accountability to internal and external stakeholders and to contribute to quality improvement. The Centre considers that the internal quality culture of universities and colleges is a primary and essential condition for quality, only then is self-evaluation fair and external evaluation produces an impact.

The above-mentioned study commissioned by the EC in 2018¹⁹, for which the SKVC also provided data, noted that Lithuania belongs to a group of countries where there is a high degree of national regulation of the internal quality assurance system in higher education institutions, with an emphasis on quality control, and although all ESG principles are implemented, their interpretation varies across higher education institutions. Interviewees from HEIs noted that the external evaluation by international expert panels have led to positive developments in internal quality assurance. As noted in the same study, students in Lithuania are widely involved in curriculum design, assessment and study development.

As mentioned above, the Centre carries out several types of evaluations: ex-ante evaluations of programmes, ex-post evaluations of study fields, and ex-ante and ex-post institutional reviews of higher education institutions. All evaluations are carried out in accordance with evaluation methodologies developed and approved by the SKVC. These legal acts are publicly available on the Centre's website²⁰ and in the Register of Legal Acts²¹. On the SKVC's website, the legal acts are published in both Lithuanian and English languages.

The evaluation methodologies have been prepared in accordance with the Law on H&R, ESG, the Resolutions of the LRV (on the issuance, revision and revocation of the permit to carry out studies and study-related activities; on the requirements for the conduct of medical residency studies and the procedure for the supervision of the dental residency study programmes), the Ministry's evaluation descriptions, and other legal acts regulating the activities of higher education institutions and the external evaluation. Compliance with the provisions of ESG-

¹⁹ PPMI, Austrian Institute of Technology, Lukas Bischof Hochschulberatung „Study to evaluate the progress on quality assurance systems in the area of higher education in the Member States and on cooperation activities at European level Final report“ http://publications.europa.eu/resource/ellar/80cf98f3-1e01-11e9-8d04-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1

²⁰ In Lithuanian <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/index.html> and in English <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/lawacts>

²¹ <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/index.html>

2015 is reflected through the evaluation criteria and information requested from HEIs. Alignment of the methodologies with ESG was carried out at the beginning of 2019 during the preparation of the documents. Notably, some of the ESG expectations (such as the cyclical nature of evaluations and the publicity of evaluation results) are set out in the Law on H&R itself or in the evaluation descriptions approved by the MoE, therefore not repeated in the SKVC methodologies.

All external evaluations are based on a self-assessment report prepared by the HEI or a similar document (such as the application in the case of ex-ante institutional evaluation). This document analyses the HEI's performance, the focus on the quality of studies and other activities, and internal quality assurance measures. Self-assessment is a process for evaluating and reflecting on the past and providing a starting point for initiation of changes in the HEI, thus contributing to the development of a quality culture in the HEI. It should be noted that self-assessment is an integral part of the quality assurance system and contributes to its proper functioning. The Centre's methodologies identify the areas to be evaluated and provide indicators and criteria against which HEIs analyse their performance. Based on the methodologies, the evaluation is carried out by experts, who also make recommendations for the improvement of studies or other activities. The methodologies for the evaluation of new study programmes (ex-ante study programmes) and for the external evaluation of fields of study (ex-post study fields) specify the areas to be evaluated, the objectives, the indicators, and the data and information to be analysed by the higher education institution, whereas the methodologies for the institutional review of a higher education institution and for the evaluation of the performance of an HEI in an external examination of a higher education institution include, in addition to the areas to be evaluated and the indicators, the criteria for the evaluation.

In addition, for both ex-post study field evaluation and ex-post institutional review, a Guidelines document for the preparation of the HEI Self-Assessment Report has been prepared for HEIs by SKVC. The Guidelines is a guidance document providing an expanded explanation of the methodologies and is intended to facilitate the HEIs' self-assessment process and the preparation of the synthesis report. The Guidelines highlight the requirements for the presentation of the Self-Assessment report, the structure of the Self-Assessment report, the criteria in more detail, the documents and information recommended and the data proposed for analysis. The relevance of these Guidelines and the demand for the Centre's training of HEIs staff drafting SARs remain high, both in terms of the feedback received from HEIs themselves and in terms of the feedback received from experts, who continue to comment on the [still] narrative nature of the self-assessment reports. In addition to the information mentioned in the methodologies or in the Guidelines, HEIs may also provide other information which they consider to be of great relevance, revealing qualitative aspects of the subject under evaluation. However, the experts note a tendency for HEIs to provide too much additional information that lacks analytical depth. These aspects are taken into account when advising HEIs.

Higher education institutions are free to use their autonomy to choose which internal quality assurance system to implement according to their own needs, operational specificities and organisational culture. Some of them, particularly in the college sector, have adopted the ISO quality management system, although the popularity of this model has been observed to be declining over time. The methodologies applied by the SKVC have been revised in line with the ESG-2015 to ensure that every aspect of the ESG-2015 is addressed in one way or another. The internal quality system of the higher education institution is given greater emphasis in the evaluations carried out according to the methodologies adopted in 2019-2020.

Another change from the previous evaluation cycle is the increased focus on higher education teachers. To this end, a mixed working group (from HEIs, public administration institutions, other organisations) has developed recommendations on the development of teachers' competences (teaching [didactic], research, general), which have been approved by MoE Order V-936 of 19 June 2020²². The responsibility for the implementation of these guidelines lies primarily with the HEI and the lecturers themselves, while during ex-ante programme, ex-

²² In Lithuanian <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/9b11a070b22111eab9d9cd0c85e0b74>

post study field and ex-post institutional reviews assessments are made of the conditions for the development of academic staff's competences, and this evaluation has an impact on the overall evaluation result in the area of teaching staff evaluation. In addition, on the initiative of Kaunas University of Technology, an informal network of HEI staff responsible for teaching didactics has been set up to share good practice, and a representative of the Centre is also involved in these meetings and discussions with the Ministry to further increase incentives and measures to improve the didactic competences of teachers.

Another important change in assessment methodologies from 2020 is an even greater focus on the recognition of foreign qualifications, the periods of study and the recognition of competences gained in a way of non-formal and informal learning (RPL) in accordance with ESG 1.4. The specificity of Lithuania is that for a very long time academic recognition for the purpose of studies has been centralised, with higher education institutions having autonomy only over the recognition of study periods and the RPL. However, the legal framework has been revised in this area too. In order to provide assessment coordinators with a better understanding of the specifics of recognition, two in-house training sessions have been held with the participation of the Head of the Lithuanian ENIC/NARIC Centre and specialists from the Qualifications Assessment Division – on the links between recognition and quality assurance, on the institutional set-up for recognition in Lithuania, and on several types of recognition, and also increased focus on this area is being given during the training of experts.

A change since the last ENQA evaluation is the increased focus in recent years on analysis and making decisions on a wide range of data on the higher education system. One example of data analysis and use is the monitoring tool for study fields developed by the Centre in cooperation with the National Agency for Education (NŠA). Its aim is to monitor changes in defined indicators for each higher education institution, field of study and study cycle on an annual basis. In cases where there is a significant change (30% or more) in at least three indicators, the Centre investigates the reasons for the changes and their impact on the quality of studies. In case of suspicions that the changed indicators may be related to the deterioration of the quality of studies, the Ministry may, on the Centre's proposal, initiate an extraordinary evaluation of the higher education institution in such a field of study in order to encourage the higher education institution to take urgent action to improve the situation and to protect the interests of students. As the deviations in 2020 and 2021 were noted, the Centre looked into the causes. The responses received from HEIs and the monitoring data showed that HEIs are generally in control of the situation, as only two cases of deviation of three or more indicators were recorded in the same HEIs' fields and cycles in both 2020 and 2021.

As part of the efforts to sustain an informal network of quality professionals in Lithuania, the Centre organises various events every year for the staff of the quality departments of higher education institutions on selected relevant topics, as identified by the Centre and as requested by the representatives of universities and colleges, thus providing up-to-date information and support, responding to the need for discussion and learning from good practice.

Since 2020, the Centre organises bi-annual quality forums for representatives of higher education institutions responsible for study quality.

In April 2020, in response to the pandemic and the quarantine in Lithuania, the SKVC conducted a survey of higher education institutions in response to the changed situation. The survey aimed to find out how Lithuanian HEIs managed to move their activities to the virtual space, what decisions had to be taken, what additional activities had to be undertaken, how the whole process went, what challenges were faced and how they managed to cope with them. There was also interest in the positive aspects of distance learning and the possibilities for the future. Out of 35 Lithuanian higher education institutions, 23 (10 universities and 13 colleges) participated in the survey. The Quality Forum 2020 continued the highly topical discussion on the challenges for HEIs in distance learning and introduced an important issue for HEIs – the assessment of distance learning. The theme of distance learning was further developed and the Centre organised an international conference on "Implementing Quality Distance Learning" at the end of 2020. In the event

feedback survey, we received an excellent response: 71.4% of respondents rated the benefits of the conference as very good, while the remaining 28.4% rated it as good.

During the last student forum organised by SKVC on 10/12/2021, attended by 55 students from universities and colleges and representatives of the Lithuanian Students' Union, it was noted that students are involved in self-assessment and external evaluation procedures (as required by legislation), but that lecturers and administration do not always see the value of involving students in the development of new programmes. On the part of the students themselves, the fatigue caused by constantly filling in questionnaires was noted, which does not result in a high percentage of turning in, but it was stressed that the interest in participation arises when the students receive feedback from the HEI administration on the improvements made on the basis of their suggestions soon enough. This dialogue is very important for the Centre, as the material collected is used by the SKVC both in the training of the HEI representatives drafting SARs and in other cases to advise HEIs on the application of good practices.

The activities of the SKVC support the public interest in having access to quality higher education and clear information on its status quo. The Centre, within its competence, investigates complaints and reports submitted by individuals regarding the quality of studies (teaching, conditions, resources) in Lithuanian higher education institutions, branches of foreign higher education institutions in the Republic of Lithuania, higher education institutions operating in the conditions of an exile. Complaints and reports of the SKVC are investigated in accordance with the Law on Public Administration of the Republic of Lithuania, the Rules for the Examination of Requests and Complaints and for the Service of Individuals in Public Administration Bodies, approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, and the Procedure for the Examination of Complaints and Reports on the Quality of Studies in SKVC, approved by the Director of the Centre²³. Where it is established that the matter in question falls within the competence of another authority, the complaint or report shall be forwarded to the competent authority.

Respecting the institutional self-governance and academic autonomy of higher education institutions and in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, complainants are encouraged to address the issues within their own higher education institution, by contacting the students' union and/or the administration, in the first instance, and only then to seek external advice in the event of failure to obtain answers. The Centre suggests that those interested in study issues should contact:

- the higher education institution (for academic assessment (e.g. exam results), requests for tuition fee refunds, complaints about the behaviour of administrative staff, lecturers or students, etc.),
- the Higher Education Institution's Disputes and Academic Ethics Committee (for issues such as academic dishonesty, plagiarism, biased assessment, etc., and in case of disagreement with the decision, the student is invited to appeal to the Ombudsperson of the Republic of Lithuania or to the court),
- the Students' Representative Office (regarding the quality of teaching, the content of lectures, inappropriate behaviour of lecturers).

In 2019-2021, the Centre has received and investigated nine complaints – seven from students of higher education institutions, one from graduates, and one anonymous complaint. In relation to them, student were counselled, HEIs contacted to clarify the circumstances, in the end recommendations to improve the performance of HEIs were issued, etc. Given the seriousness of a student complaint received in 2019 about a study programme run by one college, the MoE initiated a partial evaluation of this programme, organised by the Centre and carried out by 3 experts from Lithuania (2 academics and a student). The evaluation resulted in recommendations for the improvement of the study programme and had no other consequences.

²³ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/lt/kokybes-uztikrinimas/skundai-ir-pranesimai-del-studiju-kokybes>

5.2 ESG 2.2 DESIGNING METHODOLOGIES FIT FOR PURPOSE

Standard:

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

Guidelines: In order to ensure effectiveness and objectivity it is vital for external quality assurance to have clear aims agreed by stakeholders.

The aims, objectives and implementation of the processes will

- bear in mind the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions;
- take into account the need to support institutions to improve quality;
- allow institutions to demonstrate this improvement;
- result in clear information on the outcomes and the follow-up.

The system for external quality assurance might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance.

In Lithuania, the principles, aims and objects of quality assurance in higher education are laid down in the Law on Higher Education and Research and in the resolutions of the LRV. The evaluation process and indicators are set out in more detail in the Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, while the methodologies adopted by the Centre describe all the evaluation processes, principles, self-assessment and expert evaluation stages in greater detail.

The Centre played an active role in the development of the procedure approved by the Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, contributing to the drafting of the document and its discussion with the representatives of the Ministry. The Centre started drafting the current procedure as early as in 2016. During the drafting process, several models for the evaluation procedure were developed and discussed in detail with the Ministry's specialists and leadership. The draft procedure was presented by the Centre together with the Ministry and discussed with stakeholders: the Conference of Rectors of Lithuanian Universities, the Conference of Directors of Lithuanian Colleges, the Lithuanian Students' Union. Such discussions took place several times in order to better take into account the suggestions of the stakeholders and to clarify the points of most controversy.

In 2017, the first cycle of HEI performance evaluation (institutional review) and the evaluation of ex-post study programmes were completed and preparations for the second cycle of HEI reviews and the transition from the evaluation of ex-post study programmes to the ex-post evaluation of fields of study started. In the period 2017-2019, intensive work was carried out with the Ministry and representatives of HEIs on the development of new procedures and methodologies for institutional review and the evaluation of fields of study.

It should be noted that in February 2018, on the initiative of the Ministry and by its order, a description of the procedure for the evaluation and provisional accreditation of fields of study was approved, which was aimed at accrediting fields of study according to the approved indicators, based on the results of the previous evaluation of research activities and study programmes. The Centre was involved in the development of this procedure, although it did not endorse this evaluation model. Following an appeal by higher education institutions, the procedure and the accreditation decisions based on it were annulled in August 2018 on the basis of a Constitutional Court decision. After this SKVC, together with Ministry continued drafting a new procedure for study field evaluation and accreditation which was approved by the Ministry on 19 December, 2019. It was followed by the Methodology for conducting institutional review of higher education institution, approved by SKVC on 9 March 2020. Having this legislation in place, and plans for evaluation of study fields and institutions

drafted, a new cycle of both ex-post institutional reviews and ex-post evaluations for study fields started in Lithuania at the beginning of 2020.

The 2019 MOSTA (now STRATA) study and the subsequent report "The Role of External Evaluation in Changing the Performance of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions"²⁴ noted that changes in the performance of higher education institutions are driven by a wide range of both internal and external factors, and that it is therefore difficult to identify the direct impact of external quality assurance on the performance of higher education institutions. However, the study's report identifies three main benefits of external evaluation by the SKVC as follows:

- the recommendations made by the experts identified problem areas and provided opportunities for improvement and also possible directions for improvement;
- the recommendations provided a commitment to action and a basis for initiating the necessary changes;
- the recommendations helped to draw the attention of top management to problematic or neglected areas, and to mobilise and involve the community in the change process.

The same report concludes that the external evaluation carried out between 2013 and 2017 has had an impact on the processes of building a quality culture, namely:

- the formation of a culture of reflection and self-reflection (in both colleges and universities, the skills of reflection, complex evaluation and self-assessment are being developed);
- the perception of the need for quality/improvement (perception of the importance of quality is emerging in both colleges and universities; universities mention the desire for higher quality standards);
- the development of a culture of responsibility (in universities, there is an increase in the awareness and perception of individual responsibility among leaders and teachers, and students become full participants in the system);
- the development of monitoring systems (universities need to collect and analyse data and progressively use it for decision-making).

Suggestions for the future included:

- increase the impact of external evaluation, annual monitoring of certain indicators (with minimum benchmarks) and publicity of these results, and linking external evaluation of studies to negative monitoring results; reviewing follow-up measures and strengthening institutional responsibility for quality;
- enhance integration with other instruments by aligning the cycle of external reviews of institutions and evaluation of studies with the funding model for HE&R and other (science and arts) evaluations;
- reducing the burden on HEIs (by extending the accreditation period and centralising data submission);
- increase the focus on communication between experts, HEIs and the SKVC and dissemination of good practice.

The results of this study (involving both HEIs and experts), as well as the suggestions of the experts and members of advisory bodies used by the SKVC and the arguments expressed in the consultations with HEIs were taken into account in the development of the new external evaluation procedures and methodologies. Changes since the last ENQA review include a longer maximum accreditation period of 7 years in case of a positive evaluation, as well as a revised and extended grading scale.

Increasing attention is being paid to the analysis of a wide range of data on the higher education system and to decision-making combining quantitative and qualitative information.

It was agreed that it is important to increase the use of quantitative indicators in the evaluation, not only from the HEIs themselves, but also from the national registers. As was already explained, in order to monitor

²⁴ In Lithuanian <https://strata.gov.lt/images/tyrimai/20190318-isorinio-vertinimo-reiksme-AM-veiklos-kaitai.pdf>

developments and potential risks, a monitoring platform for the indicators of the fields of study was created and the SKVC was entrusted with the task of analysing developments, causes and, if a potential risk of a drop in the quality of studies is identified, to inform the MoE, which may initiate an extraordinary evaluation of the field of study. In both 2020 and 2021, the Centre identified significant deviations in this monitoring of indicators, analysed their causes, but did not propose to the MOE to initiate an extraordinary evaluation as this would have been a disproportionate measure of impact; in 2021, there is a marked improvement in the situation in comparison to the previous year. Further possible future developments include more grounding of external evaluations in the data available in the various registers, aiming for objective, reliable and comparable data in the evaluation and easing the burden of data submission for HEIs.

In accordance with the procedures approved by the Minister, the Centre shall develop its own methodologies for coordinated evaluations. Six evaluation methodologies have been developed to date: Methodology for the Review of Higher Education Institution Performance, Methodology for the Review of Higher Education Institution Exile Performance, Methodology for the External Evaluation of Fields of Study, Methodology for the Evaluation of New Degree Programmes to be Delivered, Methodology for the External Evaluation of Residency Studies, Methodology for the Evaluation of New Residency Study Programmes to be Delivered. Representatives of higher education institutions and student organisations were involved in the process of preparing all these

The Centre discusses its draft methodologies with university, college and student organisations, the Ministry, and the Council.

methodologies, and the drafts were presented and discussed at meetings of the Conference of Rectors of Lithuanian Universities, the Conference of Directors of Lithuanian Colleges, and in discussions with the Lithuanian Students' Union, and other interested institutions. The draft assessment methodologies are always made publicly available on the Centre's website and sent to all interested parties for their comments and suggestions for

improvement. Each methodology is also discussed in the Centre's advisory bodies: AMVK (the Methodology for the Review of the Performance of Higher Education Institutions, the Methodology for the Review of the Performance of Higher Education Institutions in Exile); SVK (the Methodology for External Evaluation of Fields of Study, the Methodology for the Evaluation of New Study Programmes). In addition to others, young doctors (residency students) were consulted when drafting the methodologies for evaluation of residency studies. The methodologies shall also be discussed and proposed by the Centre's governing body, the Council. Only those methodologies that have been agreed with the above-mentioned organisations and other entities shall be approved by an order of the Director of the Centre.

At the start of the new cycle of institutional reviews and field of study evaluations in 2020, draft evaluation plans for the whole cycle were drawn up in advance and communicated to all HEIs, which were also given the opportunity to make their own proposals for adjustments to the plan. It should be noted that some of the suggestions were taken into account. In particular, the Ministry, as one of the main stakeholders in promoting the improvement of the quality of higher education, suggested earlier evaluation of those fields of study whose programmes were assessed as weaker. The wishes of HEIs to slightly delay the evaluation of the first study fields in autumn 2020 due to the pandemic that started at the beginning of that year were also taken into account. Although the procedure governing the evaluation of the fields of study, approved by Ministerial Order, stipulates that the external evaluation plan shall be approved at least 6 months before the start of the external evaluation, the Centre has delayed the start of the evaluation of the first fields of study in view of the pandemic and the requests of the HEIs, in order to allow for a better preparation of the evaluation and to deal with the other challenges of the time. A period of 10 months was foreseen for the first study fields between the approval of the evaluation plan and the start of the external evaluation. The Centre was also flexible in the face of difficulties, allowing additional time to finalise the self-assessment reports and to provide a high-quality translation.

In the case of institutional reviews, it is foreseen that the higher education institution is given a time limit of at least 1 year for the preparation of the self-assessment report. This allows HEIs to prepare adequately for the

external review. In the event of unforeseen difficulties, the Centre is prepared to discuss the situation with the HEI and to be flexible as far as it does not interfere with the organisation of the external evaluation and the work of the experts. In drawing up the institutional evaluation plan, account has been taken of the fact that the institutional evaluation does not overlap with the evaluation of a significant part of the HEI's fields of study, in order to minimise the burden of external evaluation that the institution may have to bear.

In order to reduce the burden of external evaluation on higher education institutions, the procedure for the evaluation of fields of study provides that after the evaluation and accreditation of a field of study and a cycle of study for a maximum period of 7 years, a higher education institution will be able to launch new programmes of study in that field of study after the approval of such programmes in accordance with the internal procedure established by the higher education institution, and the external evaluation of the new programmes of study will not be mandatory. This implements the ESG provision on flexibility.

Regarding ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies, it follows a simplified procedure (without an expert panel and a visit to the university) as the purpose of it was to alleviate the burden to institutions which otherwise are seen as trustworthy and capable to internally assure quality of advanced medical training so that new studies can be launched without an extensive external evaluation. A detailed extensive external ex-post evaluation and accreditation of residency studies is foreseen after the multi-stage competence model will be fully implemented in relevant study programmes (preliminary – starting mid 2023 or early 2024, following which the external evaluation of medical and odontology studies will be included in the external evaluation plan). Currently, the transformation process is still on-going.

The change from the last evaluation cycle is the increased focus on follow-up. The Centre aims for the findings of the external evaluation to serve as a basis for improving the performance of the HEI or the delivery of the study programme, hence the strengthened follow-up element in the new evaluation cycle. The primary responsibility for follow-up lies with the HEI. Currently, the legislation provides for three phases of follow-up: 1) anticipation of improvement measures, where the higher education institution, following the external evaluation, plans measures to address the shortcomings identified by the self-assessment and the external evaluation, and to improve the performance of the higher education institution; 2) implementation of the measures, whereby the higher education institution implements the measures to improve its performance, prepares, submits to and makes public a report on the implementation of the recommendations of the external evaluation; 3) monitoring of the measures, whereby the higher education institution, at least once within the defined period of the accreditation of a HEI, monitors the implementation of the action plan.

Although in Lithuania external evaluation processes are concluded with formal accreditation decisions, the purpose of external evaluation is not only to determine compliance with legal requirements. All methodologies (both for the review of HEIs and for the evaluation of fields of study and new study programmes) identify those indicators that are essential for the achievement of quality HEIs or quality study programmes. The indicators take into account legislative requirements, the ESG and international best practice, and the views of stakeholders. The evaluation reports therefore provide an analysis of the key performance indicators of the institution. A very important objective of peer review is to make recommendations to higher education institutions for improving their performance or their curricula. The re-evaluation takes into account what changes have been made as a result of the expert recommendations. However, HEIs take full responsibility for the quality of their studies, and there may be cases where an expert recommendation has not been followed, in which case there must be a clear justification for the decision. In this way, the HEI is encouraged to own a process and to continuously improve the quality of its activities. Where an HEI or a field of study has examples of outstanding quality, these are also highlighted and distinguished in the evaluation reports.

As a small country, it is very important for Lithuania to ensure that the external evaluation takes into account not only the national but also the international context and avoids conflicts of interest that may arise in a small academic community. In view of these considerations, as well as the wishes expressed by HEIs, the SKVC mainly

uses experts from abroad. Such evaluations require experts with relevant experience and subject matter expertise, and their selection and training is a priority for the SKVC.

Quality assurance in higher education is treated as a public service in Lithuania. In this context, all types of external evaluations and events carried out by the Centre are at no cost to HEIs and are covered by the state budget and EU Structural Funds projects.

5.3 ESG 2.3 IMPLEMENTING PROCESSES

Standard:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

Guidelines: External quality assurance carried out professionally, consistently and transparently ensures its acceptance and impact. Depending on the design of the external quality assurance system, the institution provides the basis for the external quality assurance through a self-assessment or by collecting other material including supporting evidence. The written documentation is normally complemented by interviews with stakeholders during a site visit. The findings of the assessment are summarised in a report (cf. Standard 2.5) written by a group of external experts (cf. Standard 2.4).

External quality assurance does not end with the report by the experts. The report provides clear guidance for institutional action. Agencies have a consistent follow-up process for considering the action taken by the institution. The nature of the follow-up will depend on the design of the external quality assurance.

As already mentioned, the Centre's largest group of activities as a quality assurance agency for higher education is external evaluation. This represents the greatest volume of work and requires the most resources of the organisation. Ex-ante procedures (3 types) and ex-post procedures (6 types) are carried out. All these activities are based on ESG.

Type of procedure	Number of procedures completed					
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
					Procedures carried out	Decisions made
Procedures in Lithuania						
<i>Study programme level</i>						
Ex-ante study programmes	49	41	48	32	21	16
Ex-ante residency study programmes	5	0	0	0	2	2
Ex-post study programmes	206	89	/	1*	/	/
<i>Study field level</i>						
Ex-post	/	/	/	/	18**	103**
<i>Institutional level</i>						
Ex-ante	0	0	1	0	0	
Ex-post	2	0	0	0	11	5
Procedures abroad						
Programmes ex-post	0	0	0	2	3	3
Institutions ex-post	0	0	0	0	0	0
total	262	130	49	35	55	129

4 table. Procedures completed in 2017-2021 (by 1 December 2021). Data source: SKVC reports.

* In 2020, this type of evaluation was discontinued, with the exception of the re-evaluation of 1 ex-post study programme evaluation, which was carried out in compliance with a court order.

** number of fields of study for which procedures have been carried out and decisions taken; decisions are taken for each higher education institution at each cycle of study separately

The general model of external evaluation as foreseen in the ESG provision – self-evaluation, visit, publication of evaluation findings and follow-up – has been in place since the beginning of the Centre's evaluations and has not changed. In more detail, the external evaluation model consists of the following components:

- the preparation of the HEI's self-assessment report (in the case of ex-ante procedures, the submission of the relevant applications),
- the establishment of the expert group and its familiarisation to the HEI; in the case of requests for changes in the composition of the expert groups, the examination of the requests and the final composition of the expert group;
- examination of the self-assessment report (application – in case of ex-ante procedures for study programmes and HEIs),
- a visit to the HEI (normally physical, in pandemic situations – remote),
- drafting and submitting the preliminary assessment report to the HEI,
- analysis of the HEI's comments on factual errors,
- preparation of the final evaluation report,
- consideration of the findings by the relevant advisory Commission (SVK or AMVK),
- the adoption of the evaluation and accreditation decision,
- making the evaluation findings public,
- the lodging and processing of appeals, if any, prior to the accreditation decision,
- follow-up activities after the evaluation.

The same model is used for the review and accreditation of higher education institutions (including those operating in an exile), study fields, programmes of study (including residency programmes, except in the case of a simplified evaluation when only a formal compliance to legislation is established, without an expert panel and a visit to a relevant HEI) and applications for obtaining a license to provide studies and study-related activities. This model is fully in line with the principles set out in ESG.

It should be noted that in the case of new residency studies to be conducted (ex-ante evaluation of the residency), a simplified evaluation procedure is applied, whereby a commission set up by order of the Director of the Centre assesses the compliance of the studies with the requirements for the conduct of residency programmes and the documents to be submitted as laid down in legislation.

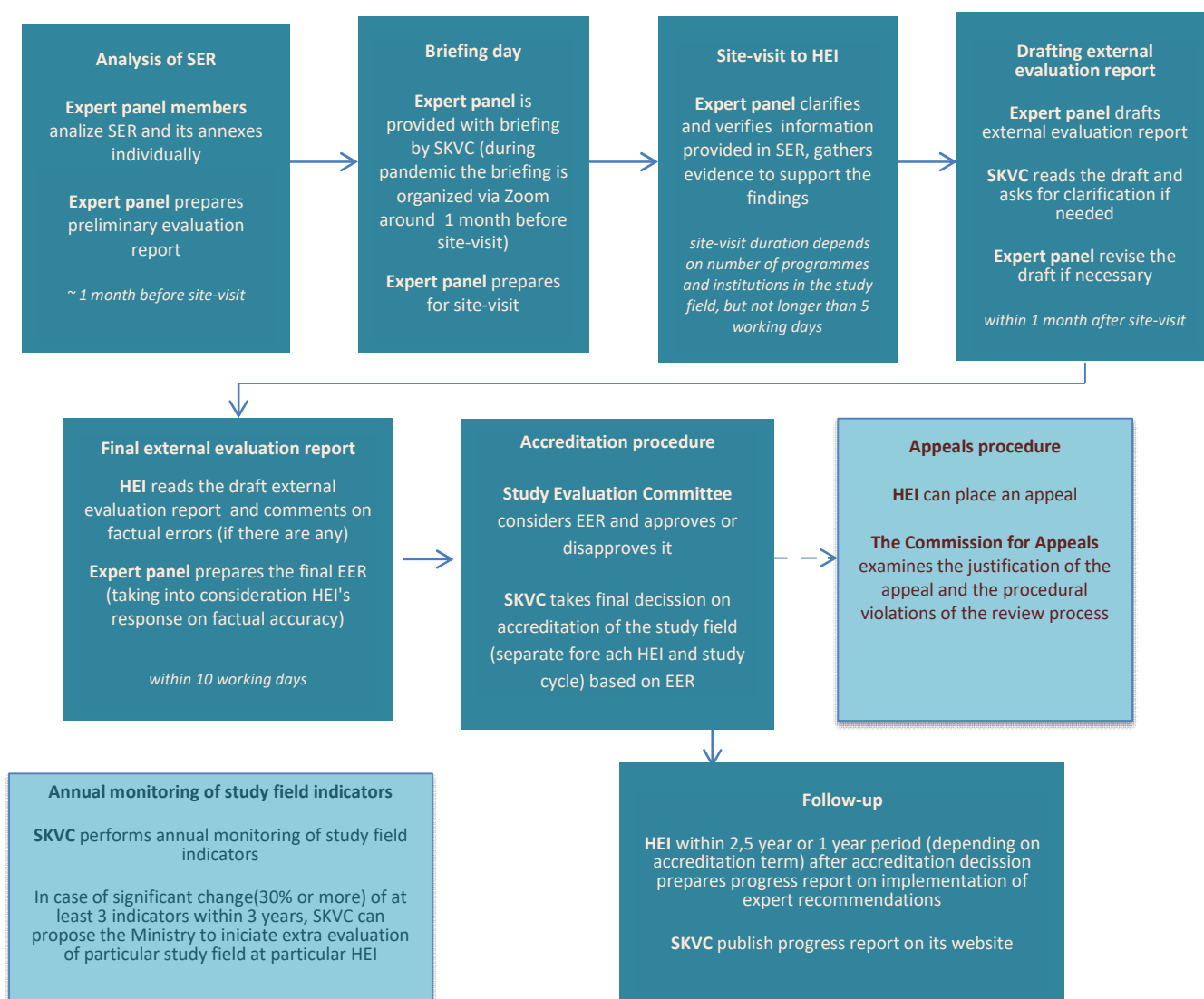
In cases where a higher education institution's field of study is accredited for a maximum period of seven years, the higher education institution may approve new programmes of study in that field of study in accordance with its internal procedures, without the need for an external evaluation procedure.

As was already mentioned, the elements of the external evaluation model are enshrined in the Law, while the external evaluation procedures, evaluation indicators, criteria and requirements are described in detail in the Government Resolution (in the case of institutional review of higher education institutions), in the Orders of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania (in the case of activities of higher education institutions, programmes of studies, fields of study, residency studies), and in the Methodologies developed by the Centre (for all types of evaluation). All these documents are publicly available in the Seimas legal acts database and on the Centre's website. As mentioned above, following the change in the external evaluation model, new methodologies of the Centre have been developed and approved, and there has been an extensive consultation process with the social partners. Importantly, the adoption of the new documents by the SKVC sets a timeframe for the application of the document, i.e. it gives HEIs time to adapt to the new

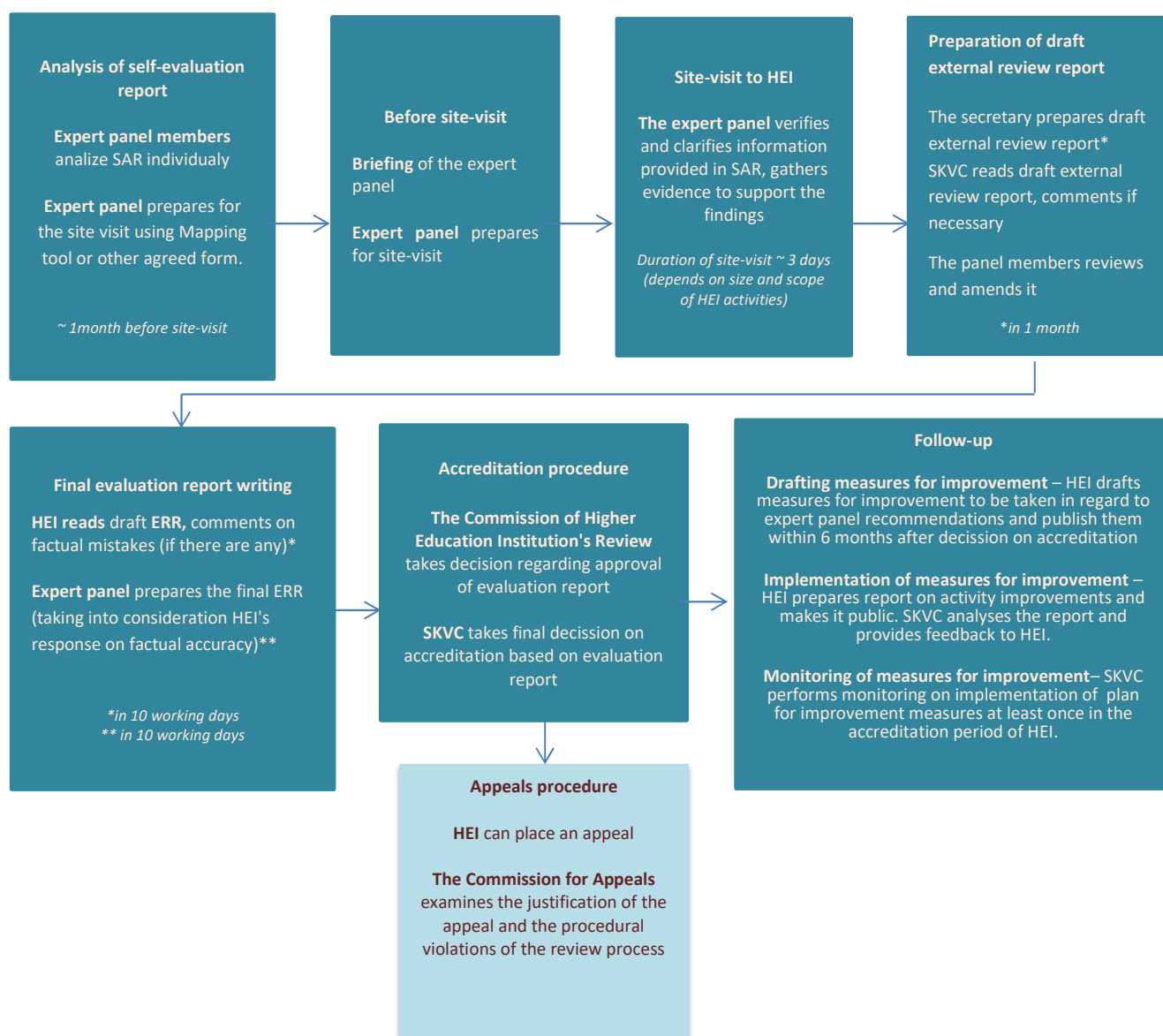
requirements. All processes that have been started but not completed before the new document comes into force are normally completed in accordance with the previous procedure.

For the external review of higher education institutions and evaluation of fields of study, international expert panels are used (including experts from Lithuania and foreign countries) or, in very rare cases, national expert groups for the evaluation of fields of study are assembled. National expert groups are practically exclusively used to evaluate the new study programmes, this is done in order to save costs and to speed up the evaluation process, as HEIs usually rush to get new programmes registered before the start of the general admission.

The principles and process of selection of experts are regulated by the Description of Selection of Experts and the Description of the Organisation of the Work of Experts, both approved by the Director of the Centre. Candidates for experts may be submitted to the Centre by HEIs, the Lithuanian Students' Union and/or the European Students' Union, professional and creative associations or organisations, ministries and other state institutions, business and industry enterprises or organisations with an interest in the specialists to be trained, and other Lithuanian and foreign expert institutions. Individuals who meet the qualification requirements for experts can nominate themselves by filling in a questionnaire on the Centre's website, and such self-nominations are regularly received. Information on experts is continuously compiled and reviewed in the Centre's information system (Data Base of Experts) in order to comply with the requirements of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and consent for the processing of personal data is obtained from experts.



1 scheme. The process of ex-post evaluation of study fields.



2 scheme. The process of an institutional review of a HEI.

The Centre uses a the same external evaluation model for both the evaluation of study programmes and study fields, as well as for the institutional review of higher education institutions, and for the evaluation of higher education institutions both in Lithuania and abroad. External evaluation of higher education institutions and fields of study takes place periodically.

The periodicity of evaluation is set out in the Law on H&R. As mentioned above, the shift from the evaluation of study programmes to the evaluation of fields of study in 2020 has led to an increased focus on the follow-up phase, with the reporting to the Centre on the implementation of the recommendations of the external evaluations moving from a recommendation to a mandatory obligation (see below). In order to monitor the situation in the fields of study and to identify risks in a timely manner, the Annual Monitoring of Field of Study Indicators was introduced.

Self-assessment report

The higher education institution is responsible for carrying out the self-assessment (or preparing a programme description in the case of a new study programme). The methodologies developed by the Centre set out the requirements for the presentation of the higher education institution's self-assessment report (a programme description in the case of new study programmes to be implemented) and the information to be included therein. The SARs of the institutional evaluation and the self-evaluation of the fields of study must also include information on how the recommendations of previous reviews/evaluations have been addressed. The Centre organises training sessions twice a year for HEI staff drafting SARs for upcoming evaluations of fields of study, explaining how to conduct the self-assessment and how to submit the results to the Centre's evaluation. Higher education institutions are consulted individually on the preparation of the institutional review SARs. HEIs are also consulted individually by telephone, e-mail or at the premises of the Centre. As mentioned, the external evaluation plan for fields of study is approved by an order of the Director of the Centre and the external evaluation plan for higher education institutions by an order of the Ministry. This information shall be made public beforehand, so institutions know well in advance when to start working on SARs. New study programmes to be carried out can be submitted to the Centre for external evaluation on a demand-driven basis throughout the year.

With the replacement of physical visits by remote visits in 2020, additional requirements have been set for the material to be submitted by HEIs for evaluation. In the event of the loss of physical access to the physical facilities by the experts, HEIs are required to submit, together with the self-assessment summary, filmed and/or photographed material showing the use of the physical facilities for the purpose of authorising studies and study-related activities, for the assessment of the programme of studies to be carried out, for the field of study and the level of studies to be pursued or for the general activities of the institution. Higher education institutions shall also provide the experts with access in advance to students' theses, coursework and examination materials.

If the experts are familiar with the material provided by the HEI and if necessary, an additional physical visit to the HEI may be organised to inspect the physical facilities used for the studies and/or activities to be assessed. Such a visit shall be arranged by prior arrangement with the HEI before the scheduled date of the remote visit. The evaluation coordinator appointed by the Centre and the Lithuanian member(s) of the expert team shall visit the physical facilities used for the studies and/or activities under evaluation. During the pandemic, there was one case where the experts requested an additional visit to the HEI.

Preparation for the evaluation/review

At least one month before the visit, the expert panel is provided with detailed methodological material to prepare for the evaluation. The Centre shall organise training for the experts prior to the evaluation of the fields of study and higher education institutions. Normally, such a one-day training was organised the day before the visit. Training is organised twice a year for the experts of new study programmes. In a pandemic situation, the training of experts is organised remotely, in advance, allowing more time for experts to prepare. The training provides experts with an overview of the Lithuanian higher education system, the legal framework, the assessment process, the accreditation requirements, the visit process, the requirements for drawing up reports, the decision-making process, and answers to related questions. During a pandemic, the distance training of experts is organised earlier (~1 month before the visit) and is longer and therefore divided into two parts. Such expert training is more efficient as it gives experts more time and allows them to better prepare for the visits. It is planned to continue to use this type and format of training after the pandemic. Before the visit to the HEI, the expert team prepares preliminary findings and questions to be clarified during the visit. It should be noted that during a pandemic, the preparation for the evaluation/reviews is much more intensive, with the experts and the evaluation coordinators organising remote debriefings as needed, which allows for better preparation for the evaluations.

As an additional source of information for the evaluation of the field of study, the experts are provided with the opinions of the students of the field of study being evaluated, collected via the 'National Student Survey' (NSA) mobile application. The main purpose of the app is to gather students' views on their studies prior to the assessment of each study field, and the app can also be used to conduct other relevant surveys. This tool is also available to higher education institutions. Currently, 11 HEIs have signed cooperation agreements with the Centre for the use of the NSA. These HEIs have been granted access and can also use the NSA App to create surveys and collect feedback from their students. In autumn 2020, the tool was piloted by creating surveys for students in the first eight assessed fields of study. The information gathered was passed on to the expert groups that assessed the study fields. It should be noted that the results of this survey cannot determine the experts' decision on the evaluation of a field of study, especially since the student response rate is not yet high. The results of the survey can be used as an additional source of information for the experts, which can help them to formulate certain questions during the visit and to clarify certain points that may have emerged from the survey. The results of the survey of first year students show that students give a fairly good feedback on the quality of their studies. Unfortunately, due to technical problems, the NSA could not be used by the Centre for the 2021 evaluations of the study fields.

The ex-ante institutional assessment of the application documents for the authorisation to carry out studies and study-related activities is only launched when the State Security Department (VSD) concludes that the institution does not pose a threat to national security. Once the VSD confirms that the institution does not pose a threat to national security, the Centre organises an evaluation of the study programmes to be carried out by the institution (forming expert panels for the evaluation of the programmes, organising visits of experts to the institution, drawing up reports/conclusions of the external evaluation of programmes). If the programmes are evaluated positively, the next stage of the application evaluation is initiated, with another expert group set up by the Centre assessing the institution's capacity (financial, material resources, personnel, scientific/artistic) to carry out the activities. The evaluation follows the same principles as for the evaluation of study programmes or higher education institutions.

Visiting

The visit of the expert panel to the higher education institution shall follow an agenda, agreed in advance with the higher education institution. Normally, visits start in the morning, but given that during a pandemic, visits are conducted remotely and expert groups are composed of experts from different countries and time zones, the visit may start later, if agreed with the HEI. During the visit, the expert panels meet the target groups:

- In the context of the evaluation of the new study programmes (ex-ante programmes), the experts meet with the administration of the higher education institution or its unit, those who drafted the programme description, the lecturers who are expected to teach in the new programme, the employer representatives who are interested in the graduates of such a programme, and the material and methodological base of the study programme to be used for the implementation of the new study programme are examined;
- in the case of the evaluation of a field of study (ex-post fields of study), the experts meet with the administration of the higher education institution or its unit, those who drafted the SAR, the faculty of the field of study, students, graduates, social partners, and get acquainted with the material infrastructure and methodological basis of the studies, the students' coursework and the final theses, and the examination material are looked at;
- during the evaluation of a HEI (ex-post institutional evaluation of the HEI), experts meet with the administration of the HEI, representatives of the Academic Council of the Senate, the Self-Assessment team, lecturers, students, graduates and social partners, and get acquainted with the HEI's infrastructure and the documents required for the evaluation. If necessary, the experts may request additional meeting(s) to be arranged in agreement between the experts and the HEI. Such requests are not frequent, but they are made and responded to.

During the pandemic, we adopted a separate procedure for the organisation of visits, which was updated after a while according to the lessons learned and the need. In the case of remote visits, the physical familiarisation of the experts with the physical facilities of the HEI has been replaced by the presentation of photo and video material and the discussion of the facilities with the responsible staff of the HEI. During this discussion, the experts ask questions related to the HEI's physical resources and, if there is a need, the HEI can organise a virtual tour of the physical facilities during the visit. So far, no such need has been expressed by any of the expert groups.

In all cases, at the end of the visit, the expert panel discusses the results of the visit within the group and verbally presents the initial observations to the HEI community.

Reports

After the visit, the expert team draws up a draft evaluation report, which is sent to the higher education institution. The higher education institution may consult the draft evaluation conclusions and comment on factual errors and underlying judgements in the evaluation conclusions, if any. In the case of new study programmes and in the case of the evaluation of the application documents for the authorisation to carry out studies and study-related activities, the expert panel may propose additions or corrections to the new programme or the application to obtain an authorisation. In the case of new study programmes, the experts ask for amendments to about ½ of the programmes. It should be noted that the experts' proposal to amend a new programme is only made when there are deficiencies in the programme that need to be addressed, but which can be easily addressed without substantially altering the study programme. The panel is required to analyse the comments made by the higher education institution and/or the corrections made and is expected to draw up the final evaluation report accordingly.

For the convenience of the experts and to ensure consistency of the evaluation, the Centre has prepared templates for the reports, which have been reviewed and slightly revised as part of the transition to the new evaluation cycle. The final conclusions are up to 60 pages for the institutional review, 30 pages for the field of study and 15 pages for the new study programmes. These conclusions are forwarded to the SVK for consideration (in the case of the evaluation of programmes of studies to be carried out and fields of study) or to the AMVK (in the case of an application for authorisation to carry out studies and study-related activities, and in the case of an institutional review). The Commissions (composed of representatives of higher education and research institutions, employees of public institutions, representatives of employers or professional associations/organisations, and students) analyse the evaluation reports prepared by the experts for the purposes of establishing their objectivity, completeness and validity. If the Commission agrees, the conclusions of the evaluation (in the case of institutional evaluations, the conclusions in full with an English translation; in the case of study fields, an extract of the evaluation report with an English translation) are sent to the higher education institution, otherwise they are sent back to the expert panel to consider for a revision (in the case of study programmes, this happens in about 10% of cases, but there has not been a case when the institutional review report would be returned for amendments).

If the higher education institution receives the final evaluation report and disagrees with conclusions therein, it can appeal. Appeals shall be examined by the Centre's Appeals Commission, which is composed of persons delegated by the Rectors' Conference of Lithuanian Universities, the Conference of Directors of Lithuanian Colleges, the Lithuanian Research Council, and the LSS. For more information on appeals, see section on ESG 2.7.

If the higher education institution agrees with the conclusions of the evaluation (or if the appeal committee decides that the appeal is ungrounded), the Centre shall take a decision on the accreditation of the study field, the accreditation of the higher education institution, and the evaluation reports shall be published on the Centre's website, in the SMPKR or in the ŠMIR, and reflected in the AIKOS. The reports are also transferred and

published in the DEQAR. In the case of an evaluation of the application documents for obtaining an authorisation to provide studies and study-related activities, the Centre shall submit a conclusion to the MoES with a proposal to grant the licence. The Centre is positive that the process of drawing up and publishing the reports is fully in line with the ESG 2.6.

Follow-up and monitoring

The follow-up includes a set of post-evaluation actions and measures (as well as the annual monitoring of the indicators regarding study fields), to implement the suggestions made during the evaluation, to improve the quality of studies, and to ensure that the shortcomings identified during the evaluation are addressed. In the follow-up phase, the HEI is the main actor.

Until the end of 2019, the submission of follow-up reports to the Centre was optional but encouraged. The Centre has carried out a review²⁵ of the Progress Reports received in the period 2016-2019 following the evaluation of study programmes, which it publishes on its website and has presented at the meeting of the Study Committee of the Lithuanian Rectors' Conference, drawing the attention of the Vice-Rectors of higher education institutions to this issue.

The Centre organises special follow-up events and assists in the dissemination of good practice among HEIs. Given the importance of follow-up for teacher training degree programmes, which have consistently received significant quality concerns and a number of them have not been accredited at all, the SKVC organised an international seminar on "Improving Pedagogy Degree Programmes on the Basis of Inclusive Approaches" on 11/12/2018. It was moderated by Ms. Petra Založnik (Independent Expert in Education, Slovenia) and Ms. Giedrė Lečickienė (Human Resources Consultant, Thinking Organisations, Lithuania), with a presentation and discussion led by Dr Paul Ashwin (Lancaster University, UK).

With the shift from evaluation of study programmes to fields of study in 2020 and the launch of a new cycle of institutional review, the follow-up phase has been further strengthened. The monitoring of the indicators for the study fields has also been introduced. Each year, prior to the general admission to higher education institutions, the Centre provides LAMA BPO²⁶ with information on non-accredited study programmes and those fields of study which are being closed.

The shift from the evaluation of study programmes to the evaluation of fields of study has reinforced the focus on follow-up activities.

It is now regulated that a higher education institution, after receiving a decision on the accreditation after its institutional review, or an evaluation of a study fields study and a corresponding cycle of studies or the evaluation of a new study programme, in accordance with the recommendations contained in the evaluation reports, shall plan and implement measures to improve the activities and to eliminate the weaknesses identified during the evaluation. At the specified time (after 2.5 years if the field of study and the cycle of studies have been accredited for a period of 7 years; after 1 year if the field of study and the cycle of studies have been accredited for a period of 3 years; after 1.5 years after the registration of the study programme to be conducted (or the accreditation of the field of study if the higher education institution does not have any accreditation of the field of study)), the higher education institution prepares the progress report on implementation of the recommendations resulting from the external evaluation (the Progress Report). It shall identify the recommendations made during the last evaluation, describe what has already been implemented and what is still planned. The Progress Report shall be published on the website of the higher education institution and submitted to the Centre. As described above, the preparation and submission of Progress Reports to the Centre for the evaluation of ongoing study programmes was recommended until 2017, but has

²⁵ In Lithuanian https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97su%C5%B4tikrinimas/Analiz%C4%97s/Pa%C5%BEangos_ataskait%C5%B3_ap%C5%BEvalga.pdf

²⁶ the Association of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions for Centralised Admissions <https://lamabpo.lt/>

become compulsory since 2020 with the transition to the evaluation of fields of study. The first Progress Reports following the evaluation of a field of study should be submitted to the Centre in early 2022.

In order to objectively assess the actions and progress of the higher education institution after the institutional external evaluation of the field of study, it is planned that the Progress Reports will be assessed by experts.

As already mentioned, the shift to the evaluation of fields of study from 2020 onwards has introduced a new element in the follow-up phase, namely the annual monitoring of the indicators of the field of study in accordance with the 7 indicators set out in the description of the procedure for the external evaluation and accreditation of studies (approved by the MoE). The data on the indicators are taken from official registers and reflected in the Education Management Information System (ŠVIS) and are publicly available. The Centre carries out annual monitoring of the indicators of the field of study on the basis of the year of study, in the first quarter of each year. If the data are analysed and a significant change (30% or more) in at least three indicators of monitoring of a field of study in a higher education institution is detected in the last 3 years, the Centre shall ask the higher education institution for an explanation of the changes in the indicators, and after assessing the risk, it may make a proposal to the Ministry to initiate an extraordinary external expert evaluation of the field of study of the higher education institution. The decision on the extraordinary evaluation shall be taken by the Minister.

As was already mentioned, in 2020, the Centre carried out a pilot monitoring of the indicators of the fields of study, which had no consequences for HEIs. In 2021, when the Centre monitored the strand indicators and identified indicators with anomalies, HEIs were asked to provide explanations. After examining the HEIs' replies, the Centre did not identify at least three outliers with substantial and obvious weaknesses in any of the study fields and cycles, which would signal the need to initiate an extraordinary evaluation.

5.4 ESG 2.4 PEER-REVIEW EXPERTS

Standard: External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

Guidelines:

At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners.

In order to ensure the value and consistency of the work of the experts, they

- are carefully selected;
- have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- are supported by appropriate training and/or briefing.

The agency ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism of no-conflict-of-interest.

The involvement of international experts in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes.

The Centre organises external quality assurance of higher education institutions' activities and the fields of study and study programmes through external experts, thus ensuring not only qualified and professional but also objective and independent assessment. Reflecting the multifaceted nature of the subject of the evaluation, the Centre endeavours to ensure that the experts have a broad range of competences. The panels are made up of academics (researchers, academics), student representatives, potential employers or representatives of the professional world. The institutional review panels include experts with experience in higher education administration and management. The number of experts per team depends on the scope and specificity of the work for which a particular panel of experts is called upon.

As already mentioned, the period 2017-2019 saw intensive development and discussion of new methodologies for the external review of higher education institutions and evaluation of fields of study. In 2017 and from 2020 onwards, external evaluations of ex-post studies were carried out by international teams (the Centre has been implementing the practice of using only international teams for the external evaluation of ex-post study programmes since 2015). In the period 2017-2019, the Centre also carried out the external evaluation (ex-ante procedure) of the new study programmes, but using local experts. Such an approach to the evaluation of the new study programmes is based on the criteria of rationality and expediency. When submitting a proposed programme of studies for external evaluation, the promoters of the proposed programme of studies shall provide assumptions/plans on how they consider the new programme of studies to be conducted. It is therefore appropriate to form smaller national expert groups of 2-3 persons for the evaluation of the new study programmes. Given the specificity and scope of this type of evaluation, employers' representatives are not always included in the expert groups for the evaluation of ex-ante study programmes, and the most common approach is to include representatives from academia, who are also practising professionals and thus represent both groups. Student representatives started to be involved in the evaluation of new programmes at the end of 2016. Student representatives have been involved in institutional evaluations since the first evaluations in 2011.

Following the first study fields evaluations in autumn 2020 (ex-post study field evaluations) and the first HEI reviews in 2021 (ex-post institutional reviews of HEIs) under the new methodologies, all these external evaluations have been carried out by international teams of experts, composed of local Lithuanian and foreign experts.

Expert selection

The Centre shall be guided by the Expert Selection Procedure²⁷ approved by the Order of the Director of the Centre for Quality Assessment of Studies No V-149 of 31 December 2019 when forming expert panels. Until then, the selection of experts and the formation of teams was based on the Order of the Director of the Centre for Quality Assessment of Studies No V-41 of 14 August 2015 'On the approval of the description of the selection of experts' and the description of the selection of experts approved therein, which has been repealed following the adoption of the new description. The new document introduced a provision stating that the decision on the inclusion of an expert in the database and his/her participation in the evaluation activities is taken by the Permanent Commission for the Evaluation of the Eligibility of Experts, set up by an order of the Director of the Centre. Proposals for the nomination of experts and for the composition of the panel for a specific task shall be submitted to the panel by the civil servant or employee of the Centre entrusted with the organisation of the evaluation, normally proposing at least three candidates for each position.

The academic representatives invited for the external evaluation should have a wide range of experience in the quality of higher education studies and in the conduct of research activities, have experience in the administration and management of higher education institutions, and should be active and productive researchers and/or academics.

Student representatives are expected to have a good academic record, an interest in quality assurance in higher education, or active membership of organisations representing student interests. The main participants in external evaluations were local students from Lithuanian higher education institutions. Since 2020, new positive trends have emerged, as the Centre has started to include more and more international students in its expert groups, thanks to an even closer cooperation with the European Students' Union. In all cases, the Centre ensures that both local and international students are well placed both in terms of the specificity of the subject to be evaluated and in terms of their experience and competences, and accordingly provides them with all the

²⁷ https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/349_3c24730602f3906bb3af174e1e94badb.pdf

necessary support during the evaluation process to enable them to participate fully as equal members of the expert groups.

Representatives of the world of work (employers) should be representatives of the companies and bodies or professional organisations, associations or potential employers concerned regarding the skills of relevant graduates. The Centre tries to include in the expert panels representatives of the professional sphere from different sectors: private, public, and non-governmental.

The principle is that all students and professionals involved in the expert panels are equal members of the groups. During the evaluation, the experts are responsible for providing insights within their own competences, but the votes of all members of the expert group have equal weight and importance in the evaluation decision.

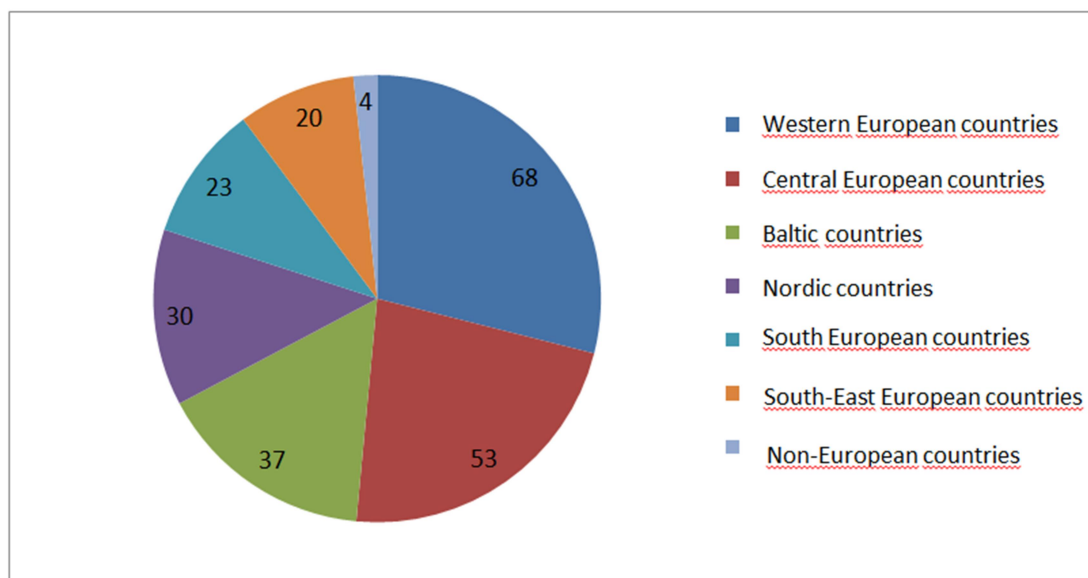
The selection of the experts shall take into account their expertise and experience and/or references received and shall respect the principle that the professional experience of the experts should be relevant to the field of study and/or the profile of the higher education institution being evaluated (in terms of sector – university or college). Care shall be taken to ensure that no more than two persons working in the same institution are on the panel. Efforts are made to ensure that the experts come from different geographical regions and represent different cultural traditions and approaches in higher education. Wherever possible, efforts are made to ensure a gender balance in the expert groups. The composition of international expert panels shall ensure that the level of English language proficiency of the professionals and students is sufficient for communication and work. In all cases, the aim is to ensure that the expert team is composed of highly competent individuals. As mentioned above, the selected experts are considered by the Standing Committee on the suitability of experts, approved by order of the Director of the Centre, which decides on the suitability of a particular expert for the evaluation and determines the order in which the experts to be invited are to be nominated.

During the selection phase, it is also necessary to ensure that the persons selected for the expert panels observe the principles of impartiality and objectivity in the evaluation process and do not have any personal interests in the higher education institutions whose quality of studies they will evaluate. As part of its proactive approach in this area, the Centre has adopted provisions in the Selection of Experts Regulations concerning the declaration of interests and the undertaking not to disclose information by experts. All experts selected for external evaluation are required to complete a Declaration of Interests and a Pledge of Non-Disclosure of Information for the Centre, indicating to the Centre their potential conflict of interest if there are any circumstances which may hinder the impartiality and objectivity of the experts in the performance of their tasks. The Centre shall have a Standing Committee to assess the suitability of experts, which shall consider conflicts of interest declared by experts. One of the Commission's decisions may be to suspend an expert from the evaluation. In such cases, another expert shall be selected to replace the suspended expert in the panel of experts.

By signing the Declaration of Interests of the Expert and the Non-disclosure Pledge, the experts also undertake to respect the principles of objectivity, impartiality, respect for the participants in the evaluation, confidentiality and cooperation. In addition, consents to the processing of personal data are collected, as required by the GDPR.

Diversity of countries from which experts are invited

The range of countries from which experts are invited is wide. Experts from 32 countries participated in the 2017 and 2020-2021 evaluations of study programmes and fields of study. The chart below shows the countries from which experts came, grouped by political-economic region.



2 chart. Breakdown of experts by region in 2017 and 2020-2021 (for the ex-post evaluation of studies)

In 2017 and the 2020-2021 period, the largest number of experts came from the Western European region (68) and the Central European region (53), as well as Lithuania's neighbours, the Baltic States (37).

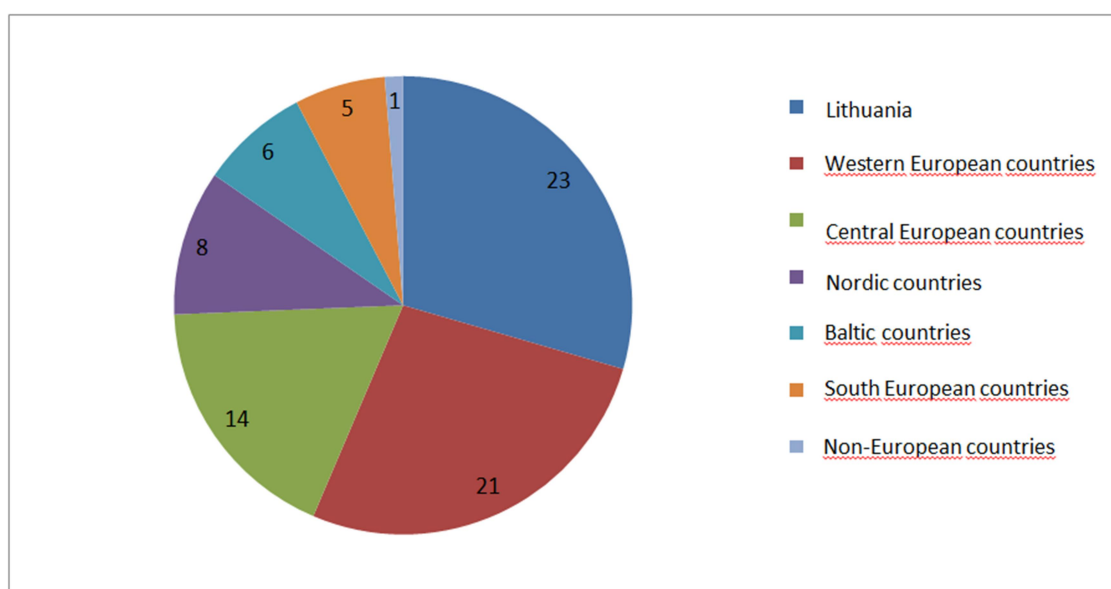
Western European countries		Central European countries		Baltic countries		Nordic countries		South European countries		South-East European countries		Non-European countries	
United Kingdom	39	Germany	17	Estonia	21	Finland	11	Spain	12	Croatia	6	Georgia	2
Ireland	13	Austria	9	Latvia	16	Denmark	8	Portugal	6	Romania	4	USA	2
France	7	Poland	9			Norway	6	Italy	4	Norht Macedonia	3		
The Netherlands	6	Hungary	8			Sweden	5	Malta	1	Greece	2		
Belgium	3	Slovenia	6							Cyprus	2		
		Switzerland	2							Serbia	1		
		Czeck Republic	2							Bulgaria	1		
										Bosnia & Hercegovina	1		

5 table. Distribution of experts by country, 2017 and 2020-2021 m. (ex-post evaluation of study fields)

The largest number of experts were invited from the United Kingdom (39), Lithuania's neighbours Estonia (21) and Latvia (16), Germany (17), Ireland (13), Spain (12) and Finland (11).

In total, 42 expert groups were formed for the ex-post evaluation of study programmes in 2017. For the ex-post evaluation of study fields, 12 expert groups have been formed for 2020 and 22 expert groups for 2021.

In 2017 and for the period 2020-2021, the largest number of experts for institutional review came from Lithuania (23), the United Kingdom (10), Ireland (7) and Estonia (6). In total, 13 expert groups were formed for the external evaluation of institutions in 2017 and 2020-2021.



3 chart. Expert distribution by country and region, 2017 and 2020-2021 m. (ex-post institucinių review)

In 2017 and for the period 2020-2021, the largest number of experts invited for institutional review was from Lithuania (23) and the Western European region (21) and the Central European region (14).

Western European countries		Central European countries		Baltic countries		Nordic countries		South European countries		Non-European countries	
United Kingdom	10	Poland	3	Estonia	6	Finland	5	Italy	2	USA	1
Ireland	7	Germany	3			Norway	2	Portugal	2		
The Netherlands	3	Slovenia	3			Denmark	1	Spain	1		
France	1	Hungary	2								
		Austria	1								
		Czech Republic	1								
		Switzerland	1								

6 table. Expert distribution by country, 2017 and 2020-2021 (ex-post institucinių review).

Expert training

To ensure that experts are well prepared for the external evaluation, the Centre regularly organises training for international teams of experts conducting external evaluations of study programmes, study fields and institutions, as well as for national experts assessing new study programmes. Separate training may be organised for students and employers' representatives. During the training, SKVC specialists give presentations to the experts on the Lithuanian higher education system, legal regulation of higher education studies, requirements for the conduct of studies and operation of higher education institutions, accreditation decision-making and the process of external evaluation, share tips for the experts' visit to higher education institutions, and introduce the requirements for the reports. During the training, the experts also learn about the Centre's expectations for their behaviour and roles, and discuss what is considered ethical and appropriate behaviour for experts during the evaluation. A significant part of the training is devoted to discussion and answering experts' questions.

The Centre regularly updates the material presented to the experts, revising and supplementing it according to changes in the field of higher education, thus ensuring that the experts receive the most relevant information during the training. The content of the training may also be adjusted to take into account the observations and suggestions on the organisation of the external evaluation made during the surveys of experts who have previously participated in the Centre's activities.

In the past, the Centre has organised training sessions for individual groups of experts on the day of their arrival in Lithuania or the day before their visits. In 2017, as part of the last ex-post evaluation of the study programmes, the Centre organised training for international teams of experts who came to evaluate study programmes in 15 fields of study before moving on to the evaluation of the study fields. Subsequently, following the suspension of ex-post external evaluations of studies due to the transition to the new external evaluation model, the Centre has only provided training to national expert teams invited to evaluate new study programmes. Two training sessions were held in February and April in 2019, two distance training sessions in April and September in 2020, and one distance training session in February 2021. It should be noted that training for teams of local experts on the evaluation of new study programmes is provided following a needs analysis, i.e. if it is identified that the evaluation of the programmes will be carried out by experts who have not been involved in the Centre's activities before or who may have insufficient knowledge of the methodology of the currently external evaluation of the programmes to be implemented.

Following the renewal of the ex-post evaluation of study programmes and their clustering by fields in 2020 under the new model, the Centre organised training sessions for international teams of experts on the evaluation of study fields in October 2020 and April 2021. In October 2020, the Centre organised distance training for students to be included in the expert panels for the fields of study and the new study programmes. In 2017-2018, there were no training sessions organized because there was no need for that.

It is important to note that from 2020 onwards, the Centre did and further plans to conduct all trainings only remotely, using teleconferencing facilities. This way of organising the training not only ensured the safety of all participants during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also saved resources for the organisation of the events. Remote training also enabled the Centre to better use the time available for training and to invite a larger number of participants to a single training session. For example, the training for the study field evaluators in autumn 2020 and spring 2021 was only organised once all the expert groups for the current semester had been formed and all the experts in those panels had been included. In addition, the training was recorded. In this way, the training was not delivered to individual expert groups, but to all the experts involved in the autumn 2020 and spring 2021 evaluations of the fields of study together. In the Centre's view, this way of organising the training only reinforced the coherence and clarity of the content delivered during the training.

Principles for organising the work of experts

In organising the work of the expert groups, the Centre is guided by the Procedure for the Organisation of the Work of Experts²⁸, approved by Order No V-149 of 31 December 2019 of the Director of SKVC. The work of the experts is carried out in stages to ensure consistency and sufficiency of the external evaluation processes: firstly, the preparation for the external evaluation, followed by a (remote) visit to the HEI, followed by the preparation and submission of the conclusions of the expert evaluation to the Centre, and lastly, the consideration of the panel's report at the Centre's advisory Commissions and the submission of final conclusions to the Centre. In turn, each of the identified stages is detailed and subdivided into sub-steps and steps in order to ensure a clear, transparent, continuous and smooth process for the participants in the evaluation process.

²⁸ https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/350_7ad31c66206fe9e6699d1cbf98150303.pdf

Procedures abroad

The Centre applies the same principles for the selection and organisation of experts work when carrying out external evaluations of studies abroad: the selection of experts and consideration by the Standing Committee to assess the suitability of the experts, the formation of a group of international experts with relevant competences and qualifications, the submission of declarations of impartiality by the members of the panel to the Centre, the organisation of their work through the provision of methodological information for the assessment as well as the information on the regulation of studies in higher education in the foreign country, the provision of conditions for discussion and preparation of the group of experts in the form of remote visits (in 2020-2021), the organisation of a visit to a foreign higher education institution, and the preparation of the experts' reports on the external assessment after the visit and their presentation of the conclusions to the Centre for discussion by the SVK. The evaluation coordinator appointed by the Centre shall be involved in all stages of the external evaluation abroad, including the visit to the foreign HEI.

Since 2018, the Centre has received enquiries and offers to assess the quality of studies from one higher education institution in Latvia, one in Switzerland and a number of higher education institutions in Ukraine. In the period 2020-2021, the Centre organised and carried out an evaluation of the following study programmes at the Carpathian Augustine Voloshynian University (Ukraine): Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes in Psychology, Bachelor's degree programmes in Financial Management and Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes in Law. Experts from Ireland, Spain, USA, Lithuania, Lithuania, Finland, North Macedonia, Sweden, Germany, Finland, and Germany were involved in these evaluations.

Expert data base

The Centre keeps information on the experts involved in external evaluations in its database, the Directory of Experts. In order to update and complete the data base of experts, the Centre regularly contacts various Lithuanian organisations, as well as foreign quality assurance agencies, inviting them to nominate experts for external assessments. Experts interested in the Centre's evaluation activities can apply themselves through the SKVC website by filling in a questionnaire in Lithuanian or in English²⁹. Alternatively, new experts to participate in evaluations are proposed to the Centre by experts who have already participated in the evaluations. The data base of experts only contains the basic information necessary to determine the suitability of an expert for a particular evaluation (work experience, including participation in other external evaluations, CVs sent). In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation, the Centre asks the experts for their permission to be included in the Centre's data base of experts and offers them to fill in the Consent to the processing of their personal data.

The data base currently contains records on over 4000 experts, including students, who have participated in external evaluations and are potentially eligible to participate. The search and selection of experts and the updating of the database of experts is an ongoing process.

The range of participation of experts in the activities of the Centre, as defined in the Expert Selection Procedure, is very broad. The Centre involves foreign and Lithuanian experts not only in external evaluations of higher education institutions' activities and fields of study and study programmes, but also in the applications of higher education institutions and branches for permission to carry out studies and study-related activities, to provide the Centre with recommendations, opinions, conclusions, including on the academic recognition of qualifications related to higher education and acquired under the educational programmes of foreign countries and international organisations, and other matters related to the creation of conditions for the free movement of persons. For example, the two advisory bodies to the Centre, SVK and AMVK, are made up of experts and representatives of social partners. The Centre also involves experts, including representatives of the

²⁹ <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/quality-assurance/call-for-experts>

professional field (employers), in various advisory commissions and project activities, and cooperates with them in order to prepare and evaluate analytical or other reports, insights, research, methodological advice, reviews, curricula, and draft legislation. In organising events, the Centre invites Lithuanian and foreign experts to give presentations, participate in discussion groups with representatives of higher education institutions and conduct workshops.

5.5 ESG 2.5 CRITERIA FOR OUTCOMES

Standard: Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

Guidelines: External quality assurance and in particular its outcomes have a significant impact on institutions and programmes that are evaluated and judged.

In the interests of equity and reliability, outcomes of external quality assurance are based on pre-defined and published criteria, which are interpreted consistently and are evidence-based. Depending on the external quality assurance system, outcomes may take different forms, for example, recommendations, judgements or formal decisions.

The Centre is empowered to take decisions – individual administrative acts – that are binding on natural and legal persons within the limits of its competence. As a quality assurance agency, the Centre makes formal decisions on:

- external evaluation and accreditation of study programmes (ex-post study programmes until 2019);
- external evaluation and accreditation of fields of study (ex-post fields of study, including residency studies);
- the evaluation of new study programmes (ex-ante programmes, including residency programmes);
- the evaluation of study programmes run by higher education institutions abroad (ex-post programmes abroad);
- institutional review and accreditation of HEIs (ex-post institutional review of HEIs, including HEIs operating in an foreign environment – ex-post institutional review of foreign HEIs);
- assessment of HEIs' application documents for authorisation to carry out studies and study-related activities (ex-ante institutional).

All formal decisions taken by the SKVC are based on publicly available and accessible indicators and criteria; the appeal procedure is specified in each decision. In practically all cases, the experts' conclusions, even in the case of very good evaluations, make recommendations to HEIs to improve performance.

During the last ENQA evaluation, the expert panel recommended a better definition of the grading scale, and the EQAR Registry Committee also made the same comment. As part of the transition to a new type of assessment, experience from abroad was collected and analysed. It was noted that the four-step scale used for the assessment of QA agencies does not have a very developed definition, with the essence of each type of judgement ('fully compliant', 'substantially compliant', 'partially compliant', 'non-compliant') being described in a very brief way. It has also been noted that some European countries have moved in the opposite direction, abandoning the writing of scores altogether. In Lithuania, a decision has been taken to move away from a four-point scale to a more nuanced five-point scale, which would allow better recognition of excellence at national and international level. In addition, while previously no scores were written for the ex-post institutional review of HEIs, this cycle has seen the introduction of not only summative pass/fail assessments but also the introduction of grades. The aim was to harmonise approach in both the evaluation of study quality and the institutional review. We hear from experts in ex-post institutional reviews who have experience of participation in previous evaluations and in the current one that it is not easy to decide in any case, it requires insight and discussion and a qualitative decision. In the Centre's view, this is the essence of expert judgement, and this is

why experts are used for the evaluation, and why decisions are not a simple arithmetic exercise. The situation where EQAR and ENQA currently apply only one positive decision (instead of 'fully compliant' and 'substantially compliant', as used to be the case with ENQA experts, it has now moved to simply 'compliant') is a further indication of the fact that it is difficult to make nuanced decisions and to ensure a uniform interpretation of the criteria, and that the problem is universal.

In the case of the evaluations organised by the Centre, not all decisions are positive and not all proposed accreditation periods are for the maximum possible period. Nor can we guarantee a positive outcome when conducting evaluations abroad – HEIs are warned that the evaluation will be rigorous but objective, based on a thorough analysis of quantitative and qualitative data and expert judgement.

Type of procedure	Decision*	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<i>Ex-post</i> study programme evaluation	To accredit for 6 years	116	51	-	-	-
	To accredit for 3 years	79	32	-	1	-
	To deny accreditation	11	6	-	-	-
<i>Ex-ante</i> study programme evaluation	To accredit	42	22	41	1	-
	To deny accreditation	5	9	5	2	-
	Terminate the evaluation procedure	2	10	2	-	-
	To evaluate positively	-	-	-	15	11
	To evaluate negatively	-	-	-	9	-
	Endorse the implementation of the programme	-	-	-	4	5
	Oppose the implementation of the programme	-	-	-	1	-
<i>Ex-ante</i> residency study programme evaluation	To accredit	5	-	-	-	-
	To evaluate positively	-	-	-	-	2
<i>Ex-post</i> evaluation of study fields	To accredit for 7 years	-	-	-	-	86
	To accredit for 3 years	-	-	-	-	16
	To deny accreditation	-	-	-	-	1
<i>Ex-ante</i> institutional review	To evaluate positively	-	-	1	-	-
	To evaluate negatively	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Ex-post</i> institutional review	To accredit for 7 years	-	-	-	-	5
	To accredit for 3 years	-	-	-	-	-
	To deny accreditation	-	2	-	-	-
<i>Ex-post</i> study programme evaluation at foreign HEIs	To evaluate positively	-	-	-	2	2
	To evaluate negatively	-	-	-	-	1

7 table. Decisions taken in 2017-2021 by final outcome.

* Different decisions of *ex-ante* study programmes related to the changes in legal acts that took place during the SKVC assessment period.

Indicators, criteria and judgements for evaluation of the fields of study and reviews of HEIs

The procedure for the evaluation and accreditation of study fields and the activities of higher education institutions, as well as the possible decisions, are set out in the Regulation on the Procedure for External Evaluation and Accreditation of Studies and the Regulation on the Procedure for External Review and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Branches of Higher Education Institutions from Foreign Countries, approved by order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport. These legal acts also set out the areas and indicators to be evaluated. The information to be analysed and the documents to be submitted for the study fields and the evaluation criteria for the activities of higher education institutions are laid down in the methodologies approved by order of the Director of the Centre:

- Methodology for the evaluation of study programmes to be implemented (*ex-ante* study programmes);

- the Methodology for the External Evaluation of Fields of Study (ex-post fields of study);
- the Methodology for the Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions (ex-post institutional).
- Methodology for the evaluation of the performance of HEIs in exile (ex-post institutional exile).

As mentioned above, the legislation is made publicly available on the Centre's website and in the Register of Legal Acts (TAR). Thus, HEIs and experts have information to the evaluation process: how and when the external evaluation is carried out, the areas and indicators to be evaluated, the criteria to be met or the documents to be submitted and the data to be analysed. It also provides an insight into the possible judgments envisaged.

In the case of ex-ante evaluation of study programmes, ex-post evaluation of fields of study, ex-post institutional review of HEIs, the following grading scale is established:

- 5 – exceptional quality – the area is evaluated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally;
- 4 – very good – the area is evaluated very well in the national context and internationally, without any shortcomings;
- 3 – good – the area is being developed systematically, without any fundamental shortcomings;
- 2 – satisfactory – the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are fundamental shortcomings that need to be eliminated;
- 1 – unsatisfactory – the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental shortcomings that prevent the implementation of the field studies.

The ex-post accreditation decision for study fields is based on an extended decision matrix. The time limit is calculated from the date on which the assessment decision is sent to the HEI and shall take one of the following decisions on the accreditation of the field of study:

Since 2020, both higher education institutions and fields of study can be accredited for periods of 7 or 3 years.

- to provide accreditation for the term of 7 years, provided that all the evaluation areas are evaluated with at least 3 points according to the evaluation areas established in the procedure and the grading scale established in annex of the Procedure;
- to provide accreditation for the term of 3 years, provided that at least one of the evaluation areas is evaluated as “satisfactory” – 2 points according to the evaluation areas and the grading scale. Such a decision to accredit may not be adopted for the second time in succession;
- to deny accreditation, if at least one of the evaluation areas has been evaluated as “unsatisfactory” – 1 point according to the evaluation areas and the grading scale or when at least one of the evaluation areas has been evaluated as “satisfactory” for the second time in a succession – 2 points according to the evaluation areas, or when it has been determined that the Master degree studies do not meet the threshold evaluation indicator for study fields specified in the procedure for the fields of scientific research and experimental development or artistic activities (art) of the university.

In case of ex-post institutional review of HEIs in exile, each evaluation area can receive one of the following five grades:

- exceptional quality – 5 – the area is evaluated exceptionally well;
- very good – 4 – the area is evaluated very well, without any shortcomings;
- good – 3 – the area is being developed systematically, without any fundamental shortcomings;
- satisfactory – 2 – the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are fundamental shortcomings that need to be eliminated;
- unsatisfactory – 1 – the area does not meet the minimum requirements.

For both the ex-post institutional review of HEIs and the ex-post institutional review of HEIs in exile, the overall evaluative judgement can be "positive" where none of the evaluation areas is rated unsatisfactory (1 point) or "negative" where at least one of the evaluation areas is rated unsatisfactory (1 point). Three accreditation decisions are possible on this basis:

- to accredit for a period of 7 years if the HEI's performance is assessed positively;
- to accredit for a period of 3 years if the HEI's performance is assessed negatively.
- to deny accreditation if the external repeated assessment results in a negative assessment of the HEI's performance in the exile.

In case of Ex-post evaluation of study programmes and ex-post institutional reviews of HEIs abroad, the same grading scale of 4 points, as it used to be, is still applied:

- 1 point – unsatisfactory – there are fundamental shortcomings that need to be eliminated swiftly;
- 2 point – satisfactory – the area meets the minimum requirements, needs improvement;
- 3 point – gerai – the area is being developed systematically, has distinct features;
- 4 point – very good – the area is evaluated exceptionally well.

Decisions are taken by consensus, i.e. when all experts agree. In the event that any expert disagrees with the group's joint opinion, he or she shall prepare a separate reasoned opinion, which shall be annexed to the evaluation report. This has not been the case in the last five years. All evaluation reports are reviewed by the Centre to ensure that they are properly drafted. In case of negative findings, the SKVC's lawyer is involved in the review of the findings.

The Centre's training of external experts focuses on the drafting of conclusions. Experts are presented with a template for reports, commentary on individual areas, and examples of good and bad practice in writing conclusions. The advice given and training of experts aims to ensure that the indicators and criteria that are used in assessments are understood and interpreted in a uniform way by experts, that their conclusions are based on evidence, and that decisions are clear and transparent.

The validity of the evaluation conclusions is considered by the Commission for the Evaluation of Studies (SVK) for programmes of study (ex-ante programmes) and fields of study (ex-post fields of study), by the Commission for the Review of Higher Education Institutions (AMVK) for authorisations (ex-ante institutional review) and for the activities of colleges and universities (ex-post institutional review). These two commissions consider whether the conclusions presented by the experts to the Centre are objective, comprehensive and justified.

The Director of the Centre, on the basis of the legislation, the proposal of the experts and the advice of the above-mentioned advisory bodies, takes a decision on the (non-)accreditation of new study programmes, fields of study or higher education institutions. Once a decision has been taken, the higher education institution shall be informed thereof. Information on the evaluation and accreditation decision and the evaluation reports are published on the Centre's website. Orders of the Director of the Centre shall be published on the Centre's website and in the Register of Legal Acts.

It should be noted that, unlike ex-ante evaluations of programmes and ex-post evaluations of courses of study, in the case of ex-post institutional reviews of HEIs, the legislation provides for very tight deadlines for the preparation of the reports and the adoption of the Centre's decision. As observed in practice, this poses considerable challenges for the organisation of the evaluation process, and possibilities to adjust this have been discussed with the Ministry.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Centre's accreditation decisions are signed by the Director, a single-person management body, in line with the rules for public administration, a whole multi-stage procedure has been set up in order to ensure the objectivity and validity of the decisions taken, ensuring that they are subject to a collective review. The first step is the review of the draft evaluation report prepared by the expert panel, which

is carried out by the SKVC's Evaluation Coordinator. After the review, the draft is sent to the HEI for information and comment on factual errors. In the light of the HEI's comments, the expert group will revise the conclusions as necessary. They are then considered final and submitted to either the SVK or the AMVK, as appropriate, for consideration. If either commission agrees with the conclusions of the peer review, the Centre will take a decision on the accreditation of the new study programme, the field of study or a higher education institution. If the commission does not endorse the evaluation reports, they are returned to the panel for refinement and, after amendments taken, resubmitted to the commission for reconsideration. In the extremely rare case where the SVK does not agree with the experts a second time, it is provisioned that an internal Ad Hoc Commission composed of the staff of the SKVC is set up to advise the Director, who makes the final decision, which the HEI can appeal against. There were no such cases in 2017-2021. There have been no cases so far where the AMVK has disagreed with the experts' conclusions.

Assessment of applications from higher education institutions to obtain authorisation to carry out studies and study-related activities

The evaluation of applications of higher education institutions for the license to carry out studies and study-related activities is organised in accordance with the Procedures for Issuing, Revising and Withdrawing the License to Carry Out Studies and Study-Related Activities (2017), approved by the Resolution of the Government, and the Procedures for Evaluating the Application for the License to Carry out Studies and Study-Related Activities (2018), approved by the Director of SKVC by the Order of the Director of the Centre. The latter sets out the evaluation process, the areas and criteria for the evaluation, the procedure for drawing up the reports and making a decision, and the procedure for appeals. After the evaluation of the higher education institution's application to obtain a license for a study and study-related activity, the experts submit their conclusions and a proposal for evaluation to the Centre. As was already explained, the evaluation is carried out in two parts: an assessment of the new study programmes submitted with the application and, if they are favourably evaluated, an evaluation of the application itself. The Centre submits the conclusions of the evaluation to the higher education institution, and also to the MoE. The Centre publishes the evaluation reports (including the reports of negative evaluations) on its website. The decision to grant/not to grant a permit is taken by the MoE and informed in writing to the HEI and the SKVC.

Accreditation of study programmes on the basis of an evaluation by another agency

As in the previous evaluation period, a higher education institution may also apply to Agencies in another country for the evaluation of study fields and new study programmes. However, the Centre's accreditation decision is based only on the findings of those agencies that are listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). In this case, the evaluation of the Programme must be carried out in accordance with the evaluation areas and grading scales set out by the MoE (if the structure of the conclusions is not in line with the areas, the conclusions must indicate which domains of the evaluation in the Agency's conclusions are in line with the evaluation areas foreseen by Lithuanian procedures). Other Agency evaluation reports submitted to the Centre must not be more than one year old. If the field of study or the new study programme of study is evaluated positively, the Centre shall take a decision on the accreditation of the field of study (in the case of a new study programme, the accreditation decision shall be taken only when the new programme is attributed to the new study field at a higher education institution). The Centre sets high standards not only for the quality of its own assessment but also for the quality of other agencies' assessments, and in the event of doubts about the quality of another agency's assessment, the Centre reserves the right to discuss the matter with the assessing agency and to refer the matter to the EQAR (there was one case of this kind in the last period). A separate case is the evaluation and accreditation of theological and religious studies, which is the prerogative of AVEPRO, in accordance with inter-governmental agreement with the Holy See.

In the period 2017-2021, four HEIs made use of the EQAR agencies, the number of HEIs remained the same as in the previous period (2010-2016), but then 65 study programmes were evaluated, whereas in this period

the number of foreign evaluations has decreased significantly. Two foreign agencies were chosen by HEIs: HCERES (France) and AVEPRO (the Holy See). In total, these agencies evaluated one new joint study programme and two fields of study (theology and religious studies). It should be noted that the studies assessed were accredited for the maximum duration of the accreditation, with the exception of one case concerning the assessment of a joint study programme.

Evaluation of study programmes that a Lithuanian higher education institution intends to carry out in a branch established in a foreign country

In accordance with the description of the procedure for external evaluation and accreditation of studies approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, if a higher education institution established in the Republic of Lithuania intends to carry out a study programme in a unit established in a foreign country, the new study programme must be subject to an external evaluation. Study programmes to be carried out in branches established in foreign countries shall be evaluated according to the same model as study programmes to be carried out in Lithuania. In 2017-2021, no Lithuanian higher education institutions applied for such an evaluation.

Application of the European Approach

It should be noted that the European Approach towards quality assurance of joint study programmes is not yet fully applied in Lithuania: it applies to new study programmes (ex-ante programme evaluation), but is not yet applied to the ex-post evaluation of study fields. This issue has been widely discussed with the academic community and the Ministry in the 2016-2019 period. At the end of 2021, the Centre submitted proposals to the Ministry for amendments to the description of the procedure for the evaluation and refinement of the accreditation term used in the Law on H&R, which would allow the application of the European Approach to the evaluation of fields of study.

5.6 ESG 2.6 REPORTING

Standard: Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

Guidelines:

The report by the experts is the basis for the institution's follow-up action of the external evaluation and it provides information to society regarding the activities of an institution. In order for the report to be used as the basis for action to be taken, it needs to be clear and concise in its structure and language and to cover

- context description (to help locate the higher education institution in its specific context);
- description of the individual procedure, including experts involved;
- evidence, analysis and findings;
- conclusions;
- features of good practice, demonstrated by the institution;
- recommendations for follow-up action.

The preparation of a summary report may be useful.

The factual accuracy of a report is improved if the institution is given the opportunity to point out errors of fact before the report is finalised.

In all external evaluations organised by the SKVC, experts prepare evaluation reports, the full versions of which are published and publicly available on the Centre's website, and for study programmes and fields of study in the State Register of Studies, Training Programmes and Qualifications (SMPKR), which is publicly available

through AIKOS. It is planned that from 2021 onwards, the findings of the evaluation of higher education institutions will also be available in the Register of Education and Research Institutions (ŠMIR). As mentioned above, in cooperation with EQAR, the Centre uploads the reports to DEQAR for publication.

The evaluation reports are always accompanied by a decision on the accreditation of the higher education institution and fields of study. According to the Law on H&R, HEIs are also obliged to publish the evaluation results. Every 2-3 years, the Centre carries out a review of HEIs' publicity of external evaluation results (2019 review³⁰), which analyses the way in which HEIs publish the evaluation results on their websites and makes recommendations for their publicity. The results of these reviews are presented to HEIs and at events.

The website of the Association of Lithuanian Higher Education Institutions for the Organisation of General Admissions (www.lamabpo.lt) provides links to the SMPKR. Here, those choosing where to study can find out how the study programmes they are interested in have been evaluated.

In order to ensure consistency in the conclusions drawn by all experts, experts are provided with templates for their reports, which include structural elements such as a description of the context of the institution or field of study being evaluated, a description of the evaluation procedures and the members of the expert panel, an analysis of the performance of the field of study or higher education institution being evaluated and the evidence gathered during the evaluation, examples of outstanding quality and the panel's recommendations for improving performance. The reports include a summary. Attention is also paid to the preparation of quality conclusions in the training of experts, both in the training of stakeholders and students to be included in future expert groups, and in the presentations of the international experts participating in the evaluations.

During the evaluation process, the experts discuss their preliminary findings before and during their visit to the HEIs. At the end of the physical visit to the HEIs, the experts were given a full day to discuss the evaluation results. Communication between the experts on the final conclusions continues after the visit, through emails and, in the case of a pandemic, videoconferencing. Once the evaluation conclusions have been drawn up, the head of the expert team signs off on the report as reflecting the experts' views. If any expert disagrees with the opinion of the group as a whole, he/she shall be given the opportunity to present his/her individual opinion as an annex to the report. There were no such cases during the period under review.

New templates for reports have been developed for both the field of study and HEI reviews following the launch of the new evaluation cycles. The documents have been improved to ensure high quality conclusions and to take into account the comments made by the experts during the first evaluation cycles and the experience of the SKVC.

Following the visit to a HEI, the draft conclusions are prepared by the expert team and agreed with the Centre within about one month. The Centre's representatives read the conclusions and, if their structure, content and writing style do not comply with the requirements set out, return them to the experts for correction. Once the draft conclusions have been agreed, they are sent to the higher education institution, which is given the opportunity to comment on any factual errors in the evaluation report. The experts, after receiving the comments of the higher education institution, decide how to correct or revise the report to make it accurate, clear and understandable for the higher education institution. The full conclusions of the HEI performance evaluation are translated into English, and in the case of fields of study, a summary of the conclusions, examples of outstanding quality and expert recommendations are translated. For the evaluation of fields of study, the full conclusions are translated in the case of a negative evaluation. The approach to translation of expert reports (which were concluded in English) remains basically the same as was during the previous ENQA review in 2017, as the present budget is insufficient to translate entire reports from English to Lithuanian.

³⁰ In Lithuanian https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97s_u%C5%B4tikrinimas/Analiz%C4%97s/Isvadu_viesinimo_apzvalga_2019.pdf

At the end of the institutional evaluation visits, the members of the Expert Group had additional meetings with the Centre's managers to discuss the progress of the visit, to be debriefed on preliminary findings of the evaluation, to hear comments on the application of the evaluation methodology, problematic aspects (if applicable) and possible improvements. In a pandemic situation, these interviews are conducted by videoconference. This particular focus on the results of institutional review is due to the potentially far-reaching implications for HEIs and for the development of the overall higher education system in Lithuania.

It is also important to mention that after the ex-post institutional review of a higher education institution has been completed and the progress report has been received, a meeting is organised between the Centre's representatives and the management of the higher education institution to discuss the previous evaluation and the steps to be taken to address the shortcomings identified in the evaluation. The HEI shall publish the progress report on its website and also submit it to the Centre, which shall make the document publicly available together with the evaluation findings.

The Centre shall publish the experts' conclusions (including negative ones) on its website here:

- For ex-ante study programmes, ex-post study programmes (under the previous procedure) and ex-post study fields <https://www.skvc.lt/default/lt/valuations>
- For institutional review of HEIs: <http://www.skvc.lt/default/lt/kokybe>
- For ex-post study programme and ex-post institutional reviews of HEIs abroad: <https://www.skvc.lt/default/en/quality-assurance/evaluation-abroad>.

When organising evaluations abroad, the same principles of drafting and publishing reports are followed as when organising evaluations in Lithuania: the experts are provided with templates for evaluation conclusions, methodological material, the visit is discussed, and the conclusions contain a common opinion of the expert group.

5.7 ESG 2.7 COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

Standard: Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

Guidelines: In order to safeguard the rights of the institutions and ensure fair decision-making, external quality assurance is operated in an open and accountable way. Nevertheless, there may be misapprehensions or instances of dissatisfaction about the process or formal outcomes.

Institutions need to have access to processes that allow them to raise issues of concern with the agency; the agencies, need to handle such issues in a professional way by means of a clearly defined process that is consistently applied.

A complaints procedure allows an institution to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out.

In an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcomes of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, that criteria have not been correctly applied or that the processes have not been consistently implemented.

Appeals

The higher education institution can challenge the formal outcome of the process through an appeal procedure. In this case, it must provide evidence that the assessment decision is not based on sound evidence, that the criteria have not been properly applied or that the processes have not been carried out consistently. Appeals received shall be examined by the Centre's Appeals Commission (advisory body), which consists of persons delegated by the stakeholders – the Conference of Rectors of Lithuanian Universities, the Conference of Principals of Lithuanian Colleges, the Lithuanian Research Council, the Lithuanian Students' Union and the

organisations uniting the social partners of the institutions of higher education – for a 3-year term of office, with the exception of the student member, who shall serve for a 2-year term. The Appeal Commission shall examine the validity of the appeal and procedural irregularities in the evaluation process. The procedures for the examination of the appeal, the organisation of the work of the Appeals Commission and the decisions to be taken are laid down in the updated Statute of the Appeals Commission approved by the Director of the Centre on 10 October 2019.

After examining the appeal, the Appeals Commission shall take one of the following decisions:

- uphold the appeal and order the Centre to carry out the actions ordered by the Appeals Commission;
- grant the appeal in part and order the Centre to carry out the actions ordered by the Appeals Commission;
- dismiss the appeal and uphold the decision of the Centre.

In deciding whether to grant the appeal in full or in part, the Appeals Commission may: refer the assessment findings back to the SVK or the AMVK (one step back in the process), refer the assessment findings back to the expert panel for revision (two steps back in the process), or order the Centre to redo the external evaluation (start the process again).

The deadlines for submitting appeals are 10 working days (in institutional reviews, as defined in the description of the procedure for external review and accreditation of HEIs and branches of HEIs from foreign countries approved by the MoE), 15 working days (as defined in the methodology for the external evaluation of fields of study, ex-post fields of study) or 20 working days (as defined in the methodology for the new programmes of study to be carried out, ex-ante programmes) from the date of sending the evaluation decision.

In the case of institutional review, the appeal shall be examined within 20 working days from the date of receipt of the appeal. In the evaluation of field of study, the appeal shall be examined no later than 45 working days from the date of receipt of the appeal; in the case of evaluation of the programmes of study to be carried out – within 45 working days.

Decisions of the Centre and of the Appeal Commission may be appealed against in accordance with the procedure laid down in the Law on Administrative Proceedings of the Republic of Lithuania. Of course, it is always possible to file a case directly to the court.

During the external evaluation of a higher education institution in exile, it may lodge a complaint with the Centre against the activities and/or omissions of the participants in the evaluation process and the procedures prior to the adoption of the evaluation decision, however, if it disagrees with the Centre's decision on the external evaluation, the higher education institution in an exile may lodge a reasoned appeal with the Ministry.

In the period 2017-2021, a total of 21 appeals were received (10 appeals against *ex-post* study programme evaluation, performed until 2018; 10 appeals against *ex-ante* study programme evaluation; 1 appeal against ex-post evaluation of the field of study). Of these, 16 were rejected, upholding the Centre's decision, and 5 were partially upheld. In partially upholding the appeals, the Appeals Commission ordered the Centre to carry out a new evaluation of the study programme on 2 occasions and to return the findings to the expert panel for revision on 3 occasions.

In Centre's view, a total number of appeals received (21) is small compared to the total number of evaluations carried out in 2017-2021 and is considered to be indicative of a properly functioning system.

Decisions of the Appels Commission	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	total
To grant an appeal	0	0	0	0	0	0
To partially grant an appeal	2	1	0	1	1	5
To dismiss an appeal	3	7	0	2	4	16
Total number of appeals per year	5	8	0	3	5	21

8 table. Results of appeals submitted to the Centre and their processing.

Compared to the period 2013-2016, the number of appeals received in 2017-2021 decreased twice (from 42 to 21). This decrease is mainly due to the reduction in the number of evaluations in this period, as in the overall context, appeals continue to represent around 4% of the total number of programmes evaluated in that period. The vast majority of appeals are based on what the appellants consider to be an unjustified assessment of an area of assessment (mainly programme objectives and expected learning outcomes, programme structure, programme management).

During the period under review, no appeals were received against the evaluation of the performance of higher education institutions. In 2017, the Centre completed the second cycle of institutional review, which started in 2015, and which assessed HEIs that had received a negative evaluation in the first cycle and a 3-year accreditation. In this cycle, two resulted in a negative evaluation and a non-accreditation decision. One of the re-evaluations did not take place after the HEI (Šiaurės Lietuvos kolegija) decided to discontinue its activities.

Court cases

The results of the external evaluation have led to the Centre being named as a defendant in legal proceedings three times between 2017 and 2021. In all cases, the disputes were initiated against external evaluation and accreditation decisions. Two of the higher education institutions' complaints were found to be justified and upheld (one of them related to the interim accreditation procedure, which was declared null and void and of no effect by a Constitutional Court decision), while the other one obliged the Centre to re-execute the external evaluation procedures. One complaint was rejected as unfounded.

Complaints and requests

There has always been the possibility of complaints and requests, but this area has received more attention since the last ENQA evaluation. In addition, as described under ESG 2.1, the Centre has in 2021 made a separate provision for the submission and handling of complaints and reports from members of the academic community³¹.

HEIs may submit a reasoned request to replace a member of the panel within the time limits set out in the methodologies, once they have been informed of the composition of the panel. The request must be based on facts that may demonstrate a conflict of interest between the expert and the HEI under evaluation, bias of the expert, etc. The Centre shall consider the comments received on the composition of the expert panel within the Standing Committee for the examination of requests from HEIs for replacement of experts, established by order of the Director of the Centre, and shall inform the HEI of the decision taken.

This option is used relatively rarely by HEIs. In the institutional evaluation, there were no such cases, and in the evaluation of study programmes (ex-ante programmes) and fields of study (ex-post fields of study) to be carried out in the period 2017-2021, 15 requests from HEIs to replace a member of the expert group were received. The vast majority of the requests were related to the replacement of a Lithuanian expert. There is a

³¹ In Lithuanian <https://www.skvc.lt/default/lt/kokybes-uztikrinimas/skundai-ir-pranesimai-del-studiju-kokybes>

high degree of competition between HEIs with similar profiles and a desire to have no experts from the academics of the competing HEI; often the bias of the experts is not evident, but rather implicit. In the course of the ad hoc panel's examination of these requests, the Centre rejected 9 requests on the grounds that the HEI had failed to provide facts demonstrating a possible conflict of interest and bias of the experts and their inadequate qualifications; it replaced or withdrew a member of the expert group on 4 occasions, in the light of the HEI's arguments; and it partially granted 2 requests by adding a new member to the group.

For its part, the Centre, through its training of experts, draws their attention to the importance of ethical behaviour in the external evaluation process.

In response to EQAR Register Committee's remarks, as of 2020, the Centre's Methodology for the External Evaluation of Fields of Study and the Methodology for the Evaluation of New Study Programmes provide for the possibility for a HEI to lodge a complaint with the Centre during the external evaluation process, prior to the adoption of the evaluation decision, against the activities and/or omissions of the participants in the evaluation process and the procedures. So far, there have been no such formal complaints, and some complaints about the lengthy organisation of the processes have been received orally. Each such complaint has been investigated, feedback has been given to the HEI and additional organisational measures have been taken within the Centre.

III – STAKEHOLDER OPINION ABOUT SKVC ACTIVITIES

The Centre regularly collects and analyses feedback from higher education institutions and the experts involved in the evaluations on the performance of the programmes, fields of study and institutions to be evaluated. This feedback is collected by means of anonymous electronic questionnaires following the evaluation. The results of the surveys are summarised annually and are intended to be taken into account in the organisation of the next evaluations.

In preparation for the present SAR, the SKVC also organised meetings with key social stakeholders in 2021 in order to gather their views on the SKVC's performance. As mentioned above, meetings were organised with the Council of the Centre, with student representatives, with representatives of advisory institutions and consultations during the discussion part of the international conference were held.

Summarising the main findings of the meetings with the social stakeholders and the surveys carried out after each evaluation of the performance of a higher education institution or study, it can be concluded that higher education institutions and experts have a positive view of the activities of the SKVC.

As evidenced by the feedback survey and the self-assessment consultations, the Centre's activities are positively perceived by stakeholders.

In the case of the institutional review, HEIs were satisfied with the smooth evaluation process and the methodological support provided by the Centre during the self-assessment and the whole evaluation. The responses indicated that the information provided by the SKVC is complete and sufficient, timely and clear. The representatives of the HEIs indicated that the self-assessment process had been useful for their institutions and that the external expert opinion provided would create preconditions and opportunities for change. They stated that the self-assessment had highlighted areas for improvement, which will be the focus of increased staff effort and attention. As regards the format of the HEI visit (remote visits), the majority were neutral: it was no different from a physical visit to the HEI, and did not cause additional difficulties. The main challenge was identified as the presentation of the physical facilities of the institutions, which the HEIs had to do in video/photo format.

When pointing out the aspects to be improved, the representatives of HEIs mentioned that they see the institutional review methodology as a document that needs to be improved (overlapping of some evaluation indicators was mentioned), and they also pointed out that the translation of the SERS and the annexes into Lithuanian when the evaluation is conducted in English is an additional time and money that the HEI has to spend on this.

The experts in the surveys indicated that the Centre is very well organised and very successful in ensuring a smooth evaluation process, providing all the necessary information and support during the evaluation. The training provided to the experts was very positively received. It was noted that the experts observe that the self-assessment reports produced by both colleges and universities are more descriptive than analytical. There is a lack of situational analysis, data, analysis of the HEI environment, linkages between the areas of assessment described, individual indicators and criteria. Almost all of the self-assessment reports exceed the recommended length (60 pages) and, according to the experts, are characterised by a lot of repetitive material that is not related to the indicators and criteria. The experts recommend that the Centre strengthen its guidance to HEIs and pay particular attention to the conduct of the self-assessment and the preparation of the self-assessment report.

This is particularly evident in the analysis of the results of the online anonymous survey, which have even improving year by year. Only the representatives of higher education institutions expressed more criticism of the activities of the SKVC during the face-to-face meetings, but even then the positive role of the Centre in the Lithuanian higher education system was noted, and the strengths of the Centre were highlighted, such as the independence and competence of its activities, the inclusion of stakeholders in quality assurance processes and its contribution to the creation of a quality culture.

The results of the surveys of the experts who carried out evaluations of the ex-post study programmes (until 2019) and the new study programmes (ex-ante study programmes) and ex-post study fields (from 2020 onwards) in the period 2017-2021 show that the Centre's methodological materials and training for experts are very positively evaluated, the format of the self-assessment report and the evaluation criteria/indicators by field are considered by the experts to be appropriate for the evaluation of a study programme / study field, the visits provided opportunities to obtain additional information for the evaluations, and the evaluations' coordinators provided the experts with professional guidance.

The quality of the self-assessment reports provided by HEIs was highlighted by the experts as an area for improvement, as some of the self-assessment reports were considered rather formal, with too much redundant information and a lack of specificity and structured information based on data. Some experts suggested the development of an electronic platform on which HEIs could upload the self-assessment reports and other documents needed for the evaluation. In the surveys, there were some opinions that some evaluation indicators overlap and could be reduced. Experts also pointed out that, with the move to remote assessments during the pandemic, it is quite difficult to assess physical resources from footage and/or photographs provided by HEIs. It is understood that such a remote visit is a temporary way of organising external evaluations during the pandemic period.

Representatives of higher education institutions – drafting applications to launch new study programmes and SARs for study fields in 2017-2021 – also positively evaluate the Centre's methodological material and training, the work of the experts and the assessment reports they produce. Representatives of HEIs are particularly positive about the professional work of the evaluation coordinators who provide advice and information on evaluation issues throughout the process.

The representatives of the HEIs highlight the preparation of the experts for the visits as an aspect to be improved, noting that in some cases the experts' in-depth knowledge of the self-assessment report, the peculiarities of the Lithuanian higher education sector, and the legal regulation of higher education studies is

insufficient. It was also stressed that some points should be changed regarding the provision of additional information to the experts, e.g. subject descriptions should be provided together with the self-assessment reports, as was the case in the past, and it is desirable that HEIs are informed as early as possible about the need for additional information for the experts.

In the discussion part of the conference on 14/12/2021, when discussing the strengths of external evaluation, it was pointed out that the external evaluations carried out so far have revealed internal problems in HEIs and have given an impetus to focus and improve the activities between evaluations and to foster an internal quality culture. The regularity of external evaluations, the publicity of the evaluation results and the internationalisation of the evaluation process were highlighted as positive features. It was noted that the attitude of foreign experts towards Lithuanian higher education was also changing for the better. The implementation of the student-centred learning paradigm, didactic competences of lecturers, the concept of study credit (ECTS), the use of data for qualitative assessment, the review of the study funding model, and the need for more career guidance for graduates so that they come to study motivated and prepared remain among the aspects that need to be strengthened at national level. The representatives of HEIs mentioned the fierce competition among HEIs and the need for the SKVC to continue to pay close attention to the selection of local experts, competences and attitudes in the evaluation process. The need to revise the legislation and to enable the full implementation of the European Approach to quality assurance of joint degree programmes, not only in the case of ex-ante evaluation of programmes, was noted.

IV – SUMMARY OF SWOT ANALYSIS OF SKVC

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherence and continuity of the Centre's activities • Ability to work successfully in a changing environment • Quick decision-making • Knowledge of project management • Professional staff • Systematic cooperation with stakeholders (HEIs, students, employers and other educational organisations) • Cooperation with and support for the Founder • Involvement of national and international stakeholders (representatives of employers, students and academic experts) in the activities and decision-making of the Centre • Positive stakeholders' feedback regarding the Centre's activities • Active international activities and recognition of the SKVC • Very high degree of internationalisation of external evaluations/reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A poorly functioning and not very user-friendly system for publishing and retrieving study programme evaluation reports • Incomplete national registers, unreliable information on monitoring of graduate careers, which limits the ability to rely on quantitative data • Low degree of digitisation of external evaluation • Limited possibilities to attract and motivate staff due to the specificities of the public sector • Weak communication with employers' organisations • Insufficient external communication
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract and train more new experts who are active and recognised • Creation of datasets from public registers and other databases for purposes of the external evaluation • Envisioning a greater future role for the Centre in the Lithuanian higher education system • Participation in international projects and working groups • Activities in other countries in the evaluation of study programmes and higher education institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced staff leaving due to uncompetitive salaries and high workloads, and the inability to attract new staff, thus increasing the workload of those who remain • Staff turnover undermines the expert and analytical capacity of the institution • High dependence on funding from EU Structural Funds • Insufficient funding for activities from the state budget • Changing legal framework • Lengthy and bureaucratic public procurement procedures due to the specificities of the public sector • Lengthy and bureaucratic staff selection procedures due to public sector specificities

This analysis is broadly in line with the areas identified in the SKVC Strategy 2020-2022 and therefore the work plan remains relevant. Opportunities for digitisation are being explored; the staffing situation is being continuously monitored and decisions have been taken to improve the efficiency of recruitment, integration and training; and a communication strategy has been approved in mid-2020. Some funding decisions have been taken and others are pending. Unfortunately, the constraints on the public sector are not expected to ease, as this is beyond the Centre's control, but further general reforms in both the civil service and the higher education sector are likely.

V – INSIGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

In carrying out its mandated functions, the SKVC implements them with a view to influencing the quality of Lithuanian higher education. In the period 2011-2018, the Centre has carried out the evaluation of all study programmes (ex-post procedures), and from 2020, it has started to implement a new evaluation model – the evaluation of fields of study. At the same time, the institutional review model has been revised and a new evaluation cycle started in 2020. In order to have an impact on the quality of higher education evaluation, such changes are necessary to avoid routine and to stimulate all actors to look at the activities from a different angle each time, to continuously improve and to be in line with the trends in higher education and its quality assurance, both in Europe and worldwide.

The new cycle of evaluation places a strong emphasis on the use of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative indicators in the evaluation process for the evaluation of fields of study and higher education institutions. The aim is to make greater use of the data collected in the various state registers and information systems to assess the effectiveness of higher education. The use of such data in evaluation processes allows for a more objective comparison of the evaluated subject in the context of other higher education institutions, but at the same time it poses certain challenges. One challenge is the reliability of the data. When the Centre started its annual monitoring of fields of study in 2020, it noticed that data on graduate employability were not reliable. This is confirmed by higher education institutions, which collect more reliable data to track the career paths of their graduates, and which in some cases differ significantly from the data collected at national level.

The needs of the Centre as an organisation remain partly the same – to carry out its activities in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, to act in a transparent, professional, high-quality, reliable manner and in accordance to international standards in the implementation of the external accountability of higher education, and to meet the expectations of our stakeholders to contribute to the improvement of the quality of studies, to the enhancement of internationalisation, and to the strengthening of confidence in the country's higher education. Some of the necessary changes are day-to-day (e.g. developing the competences of our own staff, increasing the use of information technology in the workplace), while others are broader and more systemic (e.g. collecting and using quantitative data, including the results of R&D activities, and longitudinal studies to assess quality at the national and institutional level).

One of the current challenges for the Centre is to strengthen its analytical activities. While efforts have been made so far and are currently being made to do this with existing human resources, the experience of our institution and of other QA agencies has shown that it is essential to have dedicated professionals for analytical activities, with analytical tasks as their main function. This is something that the SKVC has foreseen in its strategy and presented to the Ministry, which has also tasked the Centre with providing analytical suggestions and insights for policy making.

Another aspect related to the strengthening of analytical activities is the development of external communication. We feel that the results of the work carried out by the SKVC are not sufficiently communicated to the general public, and it is therefore necessary to strengthen this area by presenting both the evaluation results and the analytical insights.

Although the Centre's activities are currently financed by the state budget and the Structural Funds, the end of the Structural Funds funding in 2023-2024 may pose challenges. However, the Centre is starting to prepare for this in advance, together with the Ministry, and is discussing and finding solutions. The Recovery and Resilience Fund is to be used for this purpose.

Another challenge for the SKVC is attracting and retaining strong team of evaluation coordinators and analysts. The Centre has recently been facing a significant staff turnover. One of the main reasons for this is the uncompetitive salaries, which, compared especially to those in the private sector, have recently been significantly higher than those that the SKVC can offer. As a public administration institution, the Centre has a limited salary budget, and projects have to follow the salary scales set by the European Social Fund Agency. This does not allow the Centre to respond adequately to rising salaries in other sectors and to retain experienced staff in the Centre or to attract new potential staff. Solutions continue to be actively sought.

As for the future, in response to the needs of the universities, in addition to our status as an ENQA member and EQAR registered trusted agency, we will strive to obtain WFME and NCFMEA recognition by 01/01/2024.

By 2025, SKVC expects to complete both the cycle of study field evaluations and the cycle of institutional reviews, and to move to a different external evaluation model after analysing the results. To this end, we will continue to consult in advance with key stakeholders in higher education and collect and analyse experiences from abroad. This is already on the table, and various ideas are being put forward and discussed. Initial ideas are so far only being discussed within the SKVC, but in the near future it is planned to discuss them with a wider range of stakeholders. Some of the options under consideration include:

- assessments based on the analysis of study performance indicators while carrying out annual monitoring of established HEI performance indicators, with only those HEIs or programmes or fields of study, where changes in the indicators signal potential risks to the quality of studies and the interests of the students, being selected for expert assessment;
- all new study programmes and currently implemented study programmes that lead to qualifications in state-regulated professions shall be assessed;
- thematic evaluations could be carried out by selecting certain topics that are relevant for the period, by selecting a certain aspect, by using the monitoring of performance indicators for the selection of topics, by identifying strategic needs of the country and international issues;
- Exceptional quality-oriented evaluations to foster a culture of quality: HEIs are given the opportunity to select an additional area for evaluation during the regular institutional review (e.g. Quality Guidelines for attracting international students and internationalisation of studies, national selection and awards of the best lecturers; international quality labels in medical education, etc.).

The quality of higher education is multidimensional, the needs of the various stakeholders are somewhat different, and it is therefore necessary to have a wide-ranging debate on the future of the quality assurance system, which is what we intend to do. We believe that the external evaluation of ENQA and EQAR will also provide valuable ideas for the future.

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14. The description of the procedure to obtain an authorisation to provide studies and activities related to studies approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No. 149 of 01/03/2017 entitled "Regarding implementation of the Law on Higher Education and Research" <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/29ad846004a211e79ba1ee3112ade9bc/asr> (LT), https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/391_d75c59cd8d8097a655f952b1497ad0d5.pdf (ENG)
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16. Description of the Procedure for External Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Branches of Higher Education Institutions of Foreign Countries, Evaluation Areas and Indicators, approved by the Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania No. V-1529 of 19 December 2019. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/de28fb90224f11eabe008ea93139d588> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/353_08812eaefbb9c8239fa36d95b4b857d6.pdf (ENG) (valid as of 01/03/2020)
17. The Plan for External Evaluation (Institutional Review) of Higher Education Institutions, approved by the Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania No V-329 of 5 March 2020 (new wording approved by Order No V-1063 of 9 June 2021) <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/570677c0c8f011eba2bad9a0748ee64d> (LT)
18. Description of the Procedure for External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions and Description of the Procedure for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions, approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No 1317 of 22 September 2010. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.B27C398E0CD2> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/272_6d4567c75a1b16a5b8839be3dcaf98fe.pdf (EN) (no longer valid as of 01/03/2020)
19. Methodology for Performance Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions, approved by the Order of the Director of SKVC No V-32 of 9 March 2020 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/ba31c9f0645e11eabee4a336e7e6fdab> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/354_a4b1788e5db0667d8b830c666d5ab1af.pdf (EN) (valid as of 13/03/2020)
20. Institutional review methodology approved by the order of the Director of SKVC (valid up till 13/03/2020), <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.E3DD6941CA1A/peSKrbkeUb> (LT),
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/257_53986d567b5b3f7d4caeabf27f64a643.pdf (EN)
21. Description of the Procedure for External Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions Operating in Exile Conditions, approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No. 149 "On Implementation of the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Higher Education and Research" of 1 March 2017. " <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/29ad846004a211e79ba1ee3112ade9bc/asr> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/383_c7ea4986b47792a21bf34802b734a5e5.pdf (EN)
22. Methodology for the institutional review of the HEI's in exile, approved by the Order of the Director of SKVC No V-90 of 4 November 2020 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/034e35f01ea011ebb0038a8cd8ff585f> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/393_ff6e5aaace655d1cd997dd2b0cebbe5c.pdf (EN)
23. Description of the Procedure for External Evaluation and Accreditation of Study Fields, Evaluation Areas and Indicators, approved by the Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania No. V-835 dated 17 July 2019. 835 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/f7967320a89011e9b474d97de297fe08/asr> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/355_88ab811b33d9494339580a9c21d75fa9.pdf (EN) (valid as of 18/07/2019)
24. Description of the Procedure for External Evaluation and Accreditation of Study Programmes, approved by the Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania No. ISAK-1652 dated 24 July 2009. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.5BD3E9E6B184> ; <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.404519> (LT) (no longer valid as of 01/10/2019)
25. Methodology for the external evaluation of fields of study, approved by the Order of the Director of SKVC No V-149 of 31 December 2019 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/a2f5c7402bb611eabe008ea93139d588/asr> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/352_74cb58545885838ffd2ec5439a8b7b60.pdf (ENG) (valid as of 01/01/2020)

26. External Evaluation Plan for Fields of Study, approved by the Order of the Director of SKVC No V-149 of 31 December 2019 (new version approved by Order No V-54 of 3 September 2021) <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/d37825a00c7b11ec9f09e7df20500045> (LT)
27. Description of the requirements and procedures for the supervision of medical residency studies and dental residency study programmes, approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania No 144 of 13 February 2019. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/746d03a0335c11e99595d005d42b863e> (LT)
28. Description of the Procedure for Ex-Post External Evaluation and Accreditation of Residency Studies, Evaluation Areas and Indicators, approved by the Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania No. V-1269 of 24 August 2020. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/b669bd10e5d111ea9342c1d4e2ff6ff6> (LT)
29. Methodology for the Evaluation of New Residency Study Programmes to be Implemented; Methodology for the External Evaluation of Residency Studies; Plan for the External Evaluation of Residency Studies, approved by the Order of the Director of SKVC of 1 December 2020 No V-99. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/Oba84690361611eb8d9fe110e148c770> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/389_7ba2ca3031c6941cfa85299984dd5f78.pdf (EN)
30. Methodology for the Evaluation of New Study Programmes, approved by the Order of the Director of SKVC No V-149 of 31 December 2019 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/a2f5c7402bb611eabe008ea93139d588/asr> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/351_b933098e8f5390a9c95ec38c8e224be5.pdf (ENG) (valid as of 01/01/2020)
31. Methodology for the preparation of the description of the new study programme, its external evaluation and accreditation, approved by the order of the Director of SKVC http://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/255_efe44d053fc4939c92578de505c58129.pdf (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/273_7021a9cfe99d1720c5b506fb8d7c5bd2.pdf (ENG) (was valid up to 31/012/2019)
32. Methodology for ex-post study programme evaluation, approved by the order of the Director of SKVC <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.2F17DBA33A7E/obfEGTbiMK> (LT),
<https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/EN%20versija/Teises%20aktai%20SP%20ir%20IV/Methodology%20for%20evaluation%20of%20study%20programmes.pdf> (EN) (was valid up to 31/12/2019),
33. Methodology for ex-post study programme evaluation implemented by foreign HEIs, approved by the order of the Director of SKVC (currently valid)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Methodological_guidelines_programmes_Foreign_HEIs-2015.pdf (EN)
34. Methodology for ex-post institutional review of foreign HEIs, approved by the order of the Director of SKVC (currently valid)
<https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/EN%20versija/Quality%20Assurance/Evaluation%20abroad/Methodology%20for%20conducting%20institutional%20review%20of%20FHEI.pdf> (EN)
35. Experts Selection Procedure, approved by the order of Director of SKVC Nr. V-149 of 31/12/2019 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/a2f5c7402bb611eabe008ea93139d588/asr> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/278_18502efe5b4496fa22d72c59cbfc06c4.pdf (EN) (valid from 01/01/2020);
36. Procedure of Organisation of Experts' Work, approved by the order of Director of SKVC Nr. V-149 of 31/12/2019 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/a2f5c7402bb611eabe008ea93139d588/asr> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/350_7ad31c66206fe9e6699d1cbf98150303.pdf (EN) (valid from 01/01/2020);
37. Regulations of the Higher Education Evaluation Commission (SVK) [valid from 2019-10-21], approved by the order of Director of SKVC Nr. V-104 of 10 October 2019 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/8a50ee80ebf711e99681cd81dcdca52c> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/384_f4ad27095acdabc1fd40fead5ba1e8f2f.pdf (EN)

38. Regulations of the Higher Education Institutions Review Commission (AMVK), approved by the order of the Director of SKVC No. V-2 of 08/01/2020 (currently valid) <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/c3c55b80321311eabe008ea93139d588> (LT)
<https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/The%20Statute%20of%20the%20Commission%20of%20higher%20Education%20Institutions%E2%80%98%20Review.pdf> (EN)
39. Statue of the Appeals Commission of SKVC, approved by the order of Director of SKVC Nr. V-105 of 10 October 2019 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/014819f0ebf811e99681cd81dcdca52c> (LT)
https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/lawacts/docs/386_7ec24c6d57f2d22f74e2569d58bc75f7.pdf (EN)
40. Description of the procedure for handling complaints and reports on the quality of studies at the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education, approved by the Order No V-42 of the Director of SKVC of 5 July 2021 <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/63b2bd00dd5c11eb9f09e7df20500045> (LT)

VII – LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

Agency	A foreign higher education quality assurance agency listed in the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education, or agencies referred to in international treaties
AK	Appeals Commission (Studijų apeliacinė komisija, AK)
AMVK	The Higher Education Institutions' Review Commission
CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
Centre, SKVC	Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras, SKVC)
Council	Council of SKVC
EHEA	European higher education area
ENIC	European Network of Information Centres in the European Region
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ESFA	European Social Fund Agency, responsible for administration of ESF projects in Lithuania
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European qualifications framework for life-long learning
HEI	Higher education institution
INQAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
KPMPC	the Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre (Kvalifikacijų ir profesinio mokymo plėtros centras, KPMPC)
Law on H&R	Law on Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Lithuania, adopted on 29 June 2016, entered into force on 1 January 2017, as subsequently amended
LMT	Lithuania Research Council (Lietuvos mokslo taryba, LMT)
LRC	Lisabon Recognition Convention, full name – Council of Europe and UNESCO Treaty on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165)
LRS, Seimas	Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, LRS)
LRV, Government	Government of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, LRV)
LTQF	Lithuanian National Qualifications Framework
MOSTA	Centre for Monitoring and Analysis of Higher Education and Research (Mokslo ir studijų stebėsenos ir analizės centras, MOSTA), restructured and renamed into STRATA
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union and Erasmus+ countries
MoE, Ministry, Founder	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija)
QA	Quality assurance
SMPKR	Register of Study Programmes, Curricula and Qualifications (Studijų, mokymo programų ir kvalifikacijų registras, SMPKR)
STRATA	The Government Strategic Analysis Centre (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės strateginės analizės centras, STRATA), formerly – MOSTA
ŠMIR	Register of education and research institutions (Švietimo ir mokslo institucijų registras, ŠMIR)
SVK	Study Evaluation Commission (Studijų vertinimo komisija, SVK)

