

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW

**CENTRE FOR
QUALITY
ASSESSMENT IN
HIGHER
EDUCATION
(SKVC)**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the analysis and conclusions of the ENQA review of the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (*Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras, SKVC*), Lithuania. The review was performed according to the methodology described in the Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews.

The agency wishes to use the results of this review for the renewal process of the ENQA membership and also the EQAR registration for the period 2022 to 2027.

The review took place from September 2021 to June 2022 with the on-line site visit on 22nd – 24th February 2022.

The SKVC is the national body responsible for assessment of quality in higher education in Lithuania. In addition to quality assurance related duties, SKVC also serves as the institution responsible for assessment of the qualifications concerning higher education and provision of information on education systems and qualifications recognition.

The vision of SKVC is to create in Lithuania and Europe a dynamic, cohesive, efficient higher education, which would be based on common values and would be attractive and valued by individuals, organisations and society. The mission of SKVC is to contribute to the improvement of quality of studies through mutual accountability and fostering a quality culture, and to create conditions for the free movement of persons in the world by increasing transparency of qualifications and the realisation of value.

This report addresses the ESG standards where SKVC was judged as partially compliant by the EQAR Register Committee during the previous full review of SKVC, namely the ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals and ESG 3.5 Resources.

Since the last full review against the ESG in 2017, SKVC has also reported to EQAR several substantial changes related to revision of the current procedures and implementation of new procedures (in 2020 and 2021).

Therefore, this review addresses the standards of the ESG Part 2 for the following activities:

- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania
- Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania
- Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania (only the simplified version conducted until now)
- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in Lithuania (not conducted yet)
- Ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile (not conducted yet).

In relation to the changes of the national regulation in the initiation of institutional review procedures and the financing of SKVC's activities, the review panel was asked to review in detail the SKVC's compliance with the ESG 3.3. Independence.

Finally, this report also addresses two enhancement areas selected by SKVC – ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose and ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes.

The summary of SKVC's compliance with the ESG Part 2 and Part 3, based on this review, is demonstrated in the table below:

Summary of agency's compliance with the ESG (Parts 2 and 3)

| ESG | Compliance according to the targeted review¹ | Compliance transferred from the last full review² (judgement of the 2017 review panel → judgement of the EQAR Register Committee) |
|------------|--|--|
| 2.1 | Compliant | |
| 2.2 | Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only) | |
| 2.3 | Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only) | |
| 2.4 | Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only) | |
| 2.5 | Partially Compliant (for the entire organisation) | |
| 2.6 | Compliant (for new or changed QA activities only) | |
| 2.7 | Compliant (for the entire organisation) | |
| 3.1 | | Fully compliant → Compliant |
| 3.2 | | Fully compliant → Compliant |
| 3.3 | Compliant | Fully compliant → Compliant |
| 3.4 | | Substantially compliant → Compliant |
| 3.5 | Partially Compliant | Substantially compliant → Partially compliant |
| 3.6 | | Fully compliant → Compliant |
| 3.7 | | Fully compliant → Compliant/ not expected → Compliant (by virtue of applying) |

Based on SKVC's compliance with the ESG standards presented above and based on the review panel's analysis provided in this report, the review panel considers that SKVC is overall in substantial compliance with the ESG.

¹ Compliance refers to the focus areas that were evaluated in depth and are part of the Terms of Reference, i.e., standards that were only partially compliant with the ESG during the last full review, ESG Part 2 for newly introduced or changed QA activities of the agency, ESG 2.1 for all QA activities and any standard affected by substantive changes since the last full review. If any of the standards of Part 2 of the ESG are covered due to the newly introduced or changed QA activities, a remark "for new or changed QA activities only" is added in brackets to the compliance assessment.

² Compliance refers to the last EQAR Register Committee decision for renewal of inclusion on the Register, or in case when an agency is not renewing its registration in EQAR, compliance refers to the last ENQA Agency Review report and should its judgement differ from that of the panel, the judgement of the ENQA Board, as stipulated in the membership decision letter by the ENQA Board. Compliance refers to the QA activities of the agency that were reviewed during the previous full review.

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the compliance of the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (*Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras, SKVC*), Lithuania with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. It is based on an external review conducted in September 2021 – June 2022 and should be read together with the external review report of the agency's last full review against the ESG.

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

ENQA's regulations require all member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years, in order to verify that they act in compliance with the ESG as adopted at the Yerevan ministerial conference of the Bologna Process in 2015.

Registration on EQAR is the official instrument established by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for demonstrating an agency's ESG compliance. An external review is a prerequisite for registration.

As SKVC has undergone two successful reviews against the ESG Parts 2 and 3 (in 2012 and in 2017), it is eligible for a targeted review and has opted for such. The purpose of a targeted review is to ensure the agency's compliance with the ESG by covering standards that were found partially compliant during the agency's last renewal of registration in EQAR and on standards that could have been affected by substantive changes³ during the past five years while at the same time further strengthening the enhancement part of the review.

In the period between 2017 and 2022 SKVC has submitted two substantive change reports to EQAR, in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

This review therefore addresses the standards where SKVC was found to be partially compliant with during the review in 2017, the substantive changes made between 2017 and 2022 and the enhancement areas selected by SKVC.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

This review focuses on the two ESG standards where SKVC was found to be partially compliant during the last review against the ESG – ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals and ESG 3.5 Resources.

Since the last review in 2017, SKVC has twice (in 2020 and 2021) reported to EQAR substantial changes to its operation, namely related to the modification of its current external quality assurance activities and introduction of new activities.

The modified and new activities included in the scope of this review are the following:

- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania (modified assessment procedure which has replaced the ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study programmes);
- Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania (modified assessment procedure which has been renewed);

³ e.g. organisational changes, the launch of new external QA activities.

- Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania (newly established procedure with only the simplified version conducted at the present time);
- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in Lithuania (newly established procedure, not conducted yet);
- Ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile (newly established procedure, not conducted yet).

Due to the changes in the national regulation in the initiation of institutional review procedures and the financing of SKVC's activities, the review panel was also asked to examine the compliance with ESG 3.3 Independence.

In addition to this, the review also focuses on two ESG standards selected by SKVC as the areas for enhancement – ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose and ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes.

During the review process the review panel did not find any evidence of activities that were not assessed during the last full review against the ESG and were not included in the Terms of Reference for this review. The review panel also did not learn of any other substantial changes to the quality assurance activities carried out by SKVC, except the changes already reported to EQAR and included in the Terms of Reference.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE 2017 REVIEW

SKVC was last assessed against the ESG in 2017. According to the EQAR Register Committee's decision, SKVC was found to be in the following state of compliance with the ESG Parts 2 and 3:

ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance - Compliant

ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose - Compliant

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes - Compliant

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts - Compliant

ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes - Compliant

ESG 2.6 Reporting - Compliant

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals - Partially compliant

ESG 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance - Compliant

ESG 3.2 Official status - Compliant

ESG 3.3 Independence - Compliant

ESG 3.4 Thematic analysis - Compliant

ESG 3.5 Resources - Partially compliant

ESG 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct - Compliant

ESG 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies - Compliant (by virtue of applying)

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered, the 2017 review panel was satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, SKVC was in compliance with the ESG.

In regard to ESG 2.7, it was concluded that there is no specific procedure on how the higher education institutions can raise issues of concerns or how they are handled by SKVC in a professional and consistent manner. SKVC was therefore recommended to develop a specific complaints procedure that should be made easily accessible to higher education institutions.

In regard to ESG 3.5, it was noted by the EQAR Register Committee that the issue of financial arrangements and sustainability of SKVC's overall activity was already flagged in the decision on inclusion of SKVC in EQAR. The review panel's concerns raised in the 2017 report showed that these concerns remain due to a wavering financial situation and decrease of project funds and SKVC has not been able to demonstrate a realistic financial plan.

The review panel would like to note that the transfer of compliance with the ESG standards from the 2017 review applies to all activities that have been covered in the earlier review. However, the judgement on compliance for the new or revised activities has been made based on the evidence presented in 2022 and therefore can differ.

REVIEW PROCESS

The 2021 external targeted review of SKVC was conducted in line with the process described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, the EQAR Procedures for Applications, and in accordance with the timeline set out in the Terms of Reference. The panel for the targeted review of SKVC was appointed by ENQA and composed of the following members:

- Oliver Vettori (Chair, nominated by EUA), Dean Accreditation and Quality Management, Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria;
- Asnate Kažoka (Secretary, nominated by ENQA), Head of Development and International Cooperation Unit, Academic Information Centre, Latvia;
- Alexandra-Simona Zamfir (nominated by ESU, Member of the European Students' Union Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool), PhD student in medicine, "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, Romania.

Goran Dakovic, ENQA's Reviews Manager, acted as the review coordinator for this review.

The review took place from September 2021 to June 2022. The review panel received the SAR in January 2022 and met for the first briefing meeting on 27th January 2022. During this meeting the review panel was provided input from the review coordinator and also from the Director of EQAR Colin Tuck. Another meeting of the review panel took place on 16th February 2022.

The site visit took place from 22nd to 24th February 2022. It was initially planned as an on-site visit but, due to the uncertainty caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it was agreed by the review panel, ENQA and SKVC to organise it online. The review panel would like to state that the mode of the site visit did not have any impact on its content or course. Thanks to the excellent technical arrangements the review panel was able to obtain all the information necessary for conducting the review.

The draft review report was completed on 8 April 2022 and sent to SKVC for the factual check on 11 April 2022. The final review report was submitted to the ENQA's Agency Reviews Committee on 9 May 2022.

The review panel would like to confirm that the arrangements by ENQA provided for a smooth and well-coordinated review process.

All the findings and conclusions included in this report are the joint opinion of the review panel and have been agreed on during the report drafting process.

Self-assessment report

The SAR was developed by a working group of 11 SKVC staff members that consisted both of representatives from the senior management and staff members responsible for specific activities carried out by SKVC.

The work on the SAR started in the beginning of 2021 with regular meetings of the working group that was followed by individual work on different chapters of the SAR.

During the development of the SAR, the Council of SKVC, Study Program Appeals Commission and Study Evaluation Commission were consulted. Additionally, the feedback from the main external stakeholders – students, universities, employer representatives – was collected through different means.

SKVC states in the SAR that, as the detailed methodology for targeted reviews was not yet available in early 2021, the SKVC prepared for this review as they would do for a regular (full) review, and the SAR was later shortened following the recommendations from ENQA.

The review panel found the SAR to be very comprehensive and even too detailed and descriptive in a number of parts, given the narrowed focus of the targeted review. This could be explained by the fact that SKVC is one of the first agencies undergoing the targeted review and the methodology for producing SAR was not yet approved at the time when SKVC started its preparations. However, the review panel must admit that in a number of places the SAR contained information that was not related to the standard being described in that part or was not crucial for understanding the activities of SKVC under a certain standard.

Site visit

The site visit took place on 22nd – 24th February 2022 in an on-line mode. The mode of the site visit was agreed in advance by the review panel, ENQA and SKVC due to the uncertainties related to ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the number of activities that had to be covered within this targeted review, the review panel decided to implement two types of interviews – meetings with representatives of a certain group of stakeholders involved in all revised or newly created activities (for example, review experts) and meetings (focus groups) concentrating on certain topics (for example, funding). The full list of meetings that the review panel conducted is provided below:

- Meeting with the senior management team and staff providing administrative support;
- Meeting with the Director and Head of the Council;
- Meeting with the staff responsible for conducting assessment procedures (evaluation coordinators);
- Meeting with representatives of the Commission of Higher Education Institutions' Review, Study Evaluation Commission and Appeal Commission;
- Meeting with representatives of higher education institutions;
- Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool;
- Meeting with the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport;
- Meeting with SKVC stakeholders;
- Meeting on focus areas selected by SKVC (ESG 2.2 and ESG 2.5).

The possibility for translation was used only once during the site visit - in the meeting with the senior management team and staff providing administrative support.

It was decided not to conduct a separate interview with the working group responsible for producing the SAR, as the members of this group would fully overlap with the participants required for other sessions.

When discussing the issues related to assessment procedures, the participants of the meetings were asked to focus mainly on the assessment procedures included in the Terms of Reference for this review. Also, in regard to the meetings with higher education institutions and experts, SKVC was specifically asked to include representatives who would be able to provide their opinion or experience with the revised or newly introduced assessment procedures.

The review panel used the possibility to clarify any pending issues twice – once with the Director and once with the other representatives of the senior management.

The review panel appreciates the openness of all interviewees invited by SKVC and the quality of all discussions. Despite the site visit being held online, the review panel felt welcome and was able to execute the site visit in a manner appropriate for a targeted and enhancement-oriented review.

CHANGES WITHIN THE AGENCY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Currently there are 36 higher education institutions operating in Lithuania. The vast majority (23) are state funded institutions and the rest are funded from private funds. Since the last review in 2017, large reforms related to consolidation of higher education have taken place and a number of institutions have either ceased their operation or have been reorganised. The current higher education landscape represents an almost equal share of university type institutions (17) and college type institutions that are eligible to offer only short-cycle or first-cycle professional higher education (19).

According to the SAR, these changes have had a direct impact on the work of SKVC as the internal structures of several higher education institutions have changed and there has been a significant number of students for whom a possibility to continue their studies had to be ensured and monitored.

Since 2018, the Law on Higher Education and Research stipulates the status of “higher education institution in exile” for which a specific external quality assurance procedure has been developed.

Since 2017, the Lithuanian higher education system has seen a gradual decrease in the number of higher education institutions, study programmes and the local students, but the number of international students and the institutional efforts to internationalise has increased, requiring a special attention from SKVC in its methodologies.

The review panel learned that it is currently foreseen that SKVC would have the responsibility for the assessment of short cycle study programmes (EQF/LTQF 5) that have just been introduced and will be launched shortly in Lithuania. The review panel learned that the assessment and accreditation will take place according to the current evaluation methodology for ex-ante study programmes and no separate methodology is planned.

Another important development that has progressed since 2017, if compared to the previous assessment period, is the existence of descriptors for study fields on the national level. The compliance with these descriptors is binding for study programmes and therefore assessed in quality assessment

procedures. As of the beginning of December 2021, 20 new descriptors out of 22 and 16 updated descriptors out of 37 have been approved.

SKVC'S ORGANISATION/STRUCTURE

No changes in the SKVC's organisational structures or governance have taken place since the review in 2017.

As explained in the 2017 review report, SKVC is governed by a Council that consists of 11 members appointed for a term of 6 years. SKVC has three internal advisory bodies – Commission of Higher Education Institutions' Review, Study Evaluation Commission and Appeal Commission. These bodies are responsible for giving advice in regard to all assessment procedures carried out by SKVC – also the revised and newly implemented ones. These bodies operate according to specific statutes designed for each of them.

An issue worth mentioning is that the mandate of the current SKVC Council terminated in January 2022 but was prolonged in order to ensure a functional Council at time of SKVC's review against the ESG and continuity of the SKVC's position on the ongoing structural changes in the Lithuanian higher education system, for example the new funding model for higher education institutions.

SKVC'S FUNDING

SKVC's funding consists of allocations from the State budget that are made on an annual basis and funding from the EU Structural Funds projects that is also allocated to SKVC by the State, but on a multi-annual (usually 3-year) basis. SKVC also receives some funding through participation in other national and international projects or from conducting assessment procedures abroad, but this is a minor part of the overall funding.

The SKVC's annual budget is adopted for one year together with the overall State budget. The State budget is used for covering the costs of the office and staff, whereas the costs for quality assessment procedures are currently financed from the EU Structural Funds projects.

Currently the budget for covering the costs for quality assessment procedures has been foreseen until September 2023. The discussions for prolonging the period of funding are ongoing.

SKVC'S FUNCTIONS, ACTIVITIES, PROCEDURES

Since 2017 SKVC has modified or newly developed a number of quality assessment procedures. These changes have been reported to the EQAR's Register Committee in 2020 and 2021 accordingly.

The assessment procedures listed within the scope of this review are the following:

- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania;

This is a modified ex-post assessment procedure which has replaced the accreditation of study programmes. It is a mandatory assessment that aims to assess the quality of study programmes clustered according to the study fields and separated by levels (BA, MA). This assessment shall be carried out at least once every 7 years and it may be carried out also by other agencies registered on EQAR. SKVC has implemented this assessment methodology since 2020.

- Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania;

This is a modified assessment procedure that has been renewed for a new cycle of institutional reviews. This ex-post assessment focuses exclusively on the institutional level. It is mandatory, shall be carried out at least every 7 years and the SKVC has the exclusive right to perform it. SKVC has implemented this assessment methodology since 2020.

- Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania;

This is a newly established ex-ante quality assessment procedure that foresees two possibilities – simplified assessment performed by the SKVC only and a comprehensive assessment performed by an external expert panel. Only a simplified version of this assessment has been conducted until now. This assessment can be carried out only by SKVC and it was launched in 2020.

- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in Lithuania;

This is a newly established ex-post quality assessment procedure that looks at already existing residency studies. This evaluation is planned to take place at least once every 7 years and it can be performed exclusively by SKVC. It is scheduled to start in the first half of 2023 with the evaluation of the veterinary residency and the evaluation of medical residency has already been postponed.

- Ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile;

This is a newly established ex-post assessment procedure focusing exclusively on higher education institutions in exile, as stipulated by the 2018 amendments to the Law on Higher Education and Research. Currently there is one higher education institution in Lithuania that is subject to this type of review but no external evaluation of it is planned yet. This review shall be carried out every 7 years and SKVC is the exclusive provider of this type of review.

In the period 2017 - 2021 SKVC has performed the following number of assessment procedures:

| Type of procedure | Number of procedures completed | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|------|------|------|-----------|
| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
| Ex-ante evaluation of study programmes | 49 | 41 | 48 | 32 | 21 (16*) |
| Ex-ante evaluation of residency study programmes (new methodology launched in 2020) | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 (2*) |
| Ex-post evaluation of study programmes (activity discontinued in 2020) | 206 | 89 | / | 1 | / |
| Ex-post evaluation of study fields (launched in 2020) | / | / | / | / | 18 (103*) |
| Ex-ante institutional evaluation | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Ex-post institutional evaluation (new methodology launched in 2020) | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 11 (5*) |
| Ex-post evaluation of study programmes abroad | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 (3*) |

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ex-post evaluation of higher education institutions abroad | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|

*number of procedures where the decision has already been taken. In case of ex-post evaluation of study fields, the assessment takes place on the overall study field level in Lithuania but the decisions are taken for each higher education institution at each cycle of study separately.

The ex-ante evaluation of study programmes, ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania and the ex-post institutional review in Lithuania are the major external quality assurance activities performed by SKVC. The other activities included in the terms of reference for this review would be applicable only to very specific study programmes and/or higher education institutions.

FINDINGS: COMPLIANCE OF SKVC WITH THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (ESG) WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

ESG PART 3: QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

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.

2017 review recommendation

SKVC was found to be compliant with this standard in the 2017 review against the ESG. However, following the reports on substantial changes to SKVC activities, EQAR has included this standard in the Terms of Reference for this review. In particular, the initiation of institutional review procedures and the financing of SKVC's activities should be explored.

Evidence

Since its last review against the ESG in 2017 no direct changes to the independence of SKVC have taken place. Below the evidence for different components of independence is listed.

Organisational independence

SKVC is governed by the Council and the operational management is performed by the Director. As stated in the 2017 review report, the SKVC's statutes define the terms for nomination and appointment of the Director and Council members. The provisions included in these regulations ensure that the internal organisational structure of SKVC is independent from third parties. The SKVC's Council includes a wide range of stakeholders. Both from the SAR and the interviews, the review panel received confirmation that the Council meets on a regular basis and discusses important issues related to the status and operation of SKVC.

Operational independence

All evaluation procedures conducted by SKVC follow a predetermined set of regulations that is publicly available. These regulations describe all steps, including appointment of experts, defining conflict-of-interest situations. No changes in this regard have taken place since 2017. All ex-post review activities follow a certain plan that is communicated to the higher education institutions in advance. The SAR states that the establishment of the evaluation plan for the institutional reviews has been the prerogative of the Ministry both during the previous review cycle and in the current one, and there have been no changes in this respect. The development of the plans for study programme (now study field) evaluation has, however, always been the responsibility of SKVC. These plans are developed well in advance and published on SKVC website. The SAR also mentions the possibility for the Ministry to initiate an extraordinary evaluation based on the proposal from SKVC, in case of significant changes in performance indicators of a certain study field/higher education institution. The preparations for the new cycle of institutional evaluations and the evaluations of study fields took place

between 2017 - 2019, after completing the first cycle of institutional evaluations and the ex-post evaluations of study programmes. The Ministry had an important role in the design of these assessment procedures, however, the first design of the assessment of study fields that was designed with a strong influence from the Ministry was opposed by the higher education community and the relating legislation and decisions annulled by the Constitutional Court.

Independence of formal outcomes

The decisions on accreditation are solely based on the results of external assessment performed by expert panels. The decisions are proposed by the advisory institutions (Commission of Higher Education Institutions' Review, Study Evaluation Commission) and approved by the SKVC Director. These arrangements were reviewed in detail during the 2017 ENQA review and there have been no changes since then.

However, there have been a number of external changes that have had an impact on SKVC's operation, including the legislative changes in higher education provision, introduction of new assessment procedures in the national regulatory framework and political changes in the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The evidence provided in the SAR and during the discussions highlighted several possible areas of concern that the review panel has explored in the "Analysis" section:

- autonomy of SKVC in accepting or refusing new responsibilities;
- initiative for and the way of establishing methodologies for revised and newly developed assessment procedures;
- integrity of the assessment and decision-making process for the ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile;
- possible impact of SKVC's performance on the funding allocated to SKVC.

Analysis

As the overall internal organisational setup of SKVC has not changed since 2017 - neither in regard to organisational or operational independence nor in regard to independence of formal outcomes, in this section the review panel has focused on the new areas of concern identified above.

The main concerns of the review panel related to compliance with this standard were - the autonomy of SKVC in regard to its strategic decisions and operation, the SKVC's financial dependence on the government and also the status (and impact) of SKVC on the overall provision of higher education in Lithuania.

The review panel is aware of the fact that quality assurance in higher education in Lithuania is a highly regulated area. This is possibly linked to the fact that SKVC executes a national mandate and is a public administration institution financed from the state budget.

The review panel is of the opinion that the current mandate of SKVC is very extensive, making the agency a very powerful player in the Lithuanian higher education sector. However, during the discussions the review panel learned that there are intentions to increase this mandate even more by adding additional national functions. The review panel does not consider it as a threat, as long as it is accompanied with adequate resources provided by the state and as long as SKVC has the possibility to negotiate about the functions and even refuse them. On another note, though, with the SKVC's mandate becoming bigger, the higher education institutions and higher education system in general become more dependent on SKVC as the provider of a number of important functions and the exclusive provider of some. While this particular aspect is not related to SKVC's independence from third parties, the review panel finds it important that SKVC reflects on this in relation with the autonomy of higher education institutions and respect for diversity of opinions within the higher

education sector. This becomes even more relevant when considering the situation with resources (see the section 3.5 or this report).

Another issue that read through the SAR and was voiced in some of the interviews is the autonomy of SKVC in developing procedures for external quality assessment. It is clear that operation in a highly regulated system with one national quality assurance body that is accountable to the state, puts its limitations and a fine balance has to be found between the governmental expectations and the mission of the agency. This is usually reflected in multilevel legal arrangements where certain elements are pre-defined by national regulations and the rest is left to the discretion of the agency. In the case of SKVC external stakeholders seem to be very active in proposing activities that would be beneficial for them.

Although the fact that the first procedure for assessment of study fields proposed by the Ministry was refused by the academic community shows that there is freedom of speech and the academic community is strong in voicing its opinion, the review panel must admit that SKVC operates in a rather challenging environment and is not always considered by the Ministry as an equal partner.

All three newly established assessment procedures - ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania, ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in Lithuania, ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile - are targeted towards very specific stakeholders.

All this together may create an impression that SKVC is reacting (or even forced to react) to the demands rather than sets its own agenda in regard to the overall external quality assurance system. This should be taken into account when discussing the arrangements for the new cycle of assessments starting after 2025.

An issue related to this, is the setup of the ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile where the review panel had some concerns both about the development process of this procedure and also about the impact of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the outcome of it.

In the opinion of the review panel, the main threat to SKVC's independence is related to the dependency on the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in regard to funding. While SKVC claimed that the funding is generally sufficient, although it takes time to negotiate it, the review panel could not agree that this approach is sustainable and beneficial for SKVC in the long-term perspective. The concerns of the review panel were reinforced by the feeling that read through the meeting with the Ministry that there are certain expectations towards SKVC that SKVC has to fulfil and that the additional funding could possibly be allocated or refused depending on whether SKVC meets those expectations. The current financial arrangements of SKVC with the dependence of the Ministry as the main source of funding do not add to the stability of SKVC as an organisation and raise certain concerns about the impact of one stakeholder, although technically from the perspective of organisational and operational independence the Ministry is just one of the stakeholders, with no more or less power than the others. These concerns are further detailed in the section 3.5 Resources.

Panel commendations

1. The review panel commends the genuine involvement of SKVC's stakeholders in the development of assessment methodologies.
2. The review panel commends the efforts by SKVC to continuously ensure a fully independent internal organisational structure.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. The review panel suggests that SKVC reflects on the current and future role and responsibilities of SKVC and where this might lead to additional goal conflicts or raise the complexity regarding stakeholder expectations.
2. SKVC is advised to be careful to safeguard its independence when defining methodologies in consultations with the ministry and other relevant bodies.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ESG 3.5 RESOURCES

Standard:

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

2017 review recommendation:

The panel recommends SKVC developing a financial plan as a joint effort of both council and management. This financial planning demands an analysis of the current financial situation, realistic financial goals and priorities, well-considered conclusions and a rigid implementation. This plan might have far-reaching consequences but it would help the agency to at least guarantee the funding of its core activities.

Evidence

As the recommendation from the 2017 review and the judgement on partial compliance is directly related to financial resources, the review panel will mostly focus on the financial resources in this chapter. The review panel will also address the other resources that are affected by the funding issues.

The issue of SKVC's financial sustainability has been flagged since its first review against the ESG that was used for SKVC's inclusion in EQAR in 2012.

In the 2017 report, the review panel states that SKVC is financed by a combination of allocations from the state budget and funding from the EU Structural Funds that are also allocated by the state. Other funding received by SKVC is usually based on projects or international reviews. The 2017 review panel states that SKVC recognises the problem of sufficient funds for all its tasks and lists the exact activities for which the lack of funding was found to be crucial - follow-up procedures, publication of reports, translation. The major concern was related to the fact that the EU Structural Funds are decreasing and therefore project funds are running out and there is an uncertainty about SKVC's ability to carry out external assessments in the future.

The 2017 review panel found that, despite identifying the financial arrangements as a threat, SKVC has not developed a financial plan that would take into account all the aspects identified. The SKVC Council was, however, confident that the lacking funds would be provided eventually. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport had certain expectations towards the changes in the higher education system (reorganisation of higher education institutions, decrease in the number of programmes, clustering programmes) that would decrease the funding necessary for external quality assessments. The 2017 review panel has mentioned that a last resort would be to ask the higher education institutions to contribute to the financing of the quality assurance activities as is common in other countries.

In 2022 the situation has not changed. The funding for the staff and office space is provided by the government whereas the quality assessment procedures are financed by the EU Structural Funds. The review panel did not learn of any financial plans that would meet the expectations of the 2017 panel or the current panel.

In the SWOT analysis for the 2021 review, SKVC has listed the following threats - high dependence on funding from the EU Structural Funds and insufficient funding for activities from the state budget.

In addition to the funding issues, the review panel has focused on the issue of human resources of SKVC that had also been highlighted already in the 2017 review. While most of the senior staff members are still working for SKVC, the tendency of high turnover of the junior level staff has continued. This is of particular importance because the majority of assessment coordinators who perform the core activities of SKVC represent junior level staff. The high turnover has been explained by SKVC with low salaries and no possibilities for career advancement within the SKVC.

Analysis

In the opinion of the review panel, the issue of financial sustainability is closely related with the independence of SKVC. Although the review panel did not downgrade SKVC's compliance with the ESG 3.3 in order not to use the same arguments for the judgement on compliance for two standards, this issue certainly diminishes independence, too.

The main financial risks identified by the review panel based on the SAR and the evidence presented are the following:

- dependence on the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport with state funding being disbursed on a yearly basis, and plans made regarding three years;
- dependence on EU Structural Funds which will only increase the dependence on the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and adds to risks after/if the European funds run out/are discontinued;
- no clear strategy yet regarding securing long term financial stability;
- The need to ask the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport to balance SKVC out at the end of the year if SKVC exceeds the budget allocated.

The 2017 assumption of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport that the new arrangements for quality assurance would decrease the funding necessary for it has not been proved to be true. As one of the consequences of insufficient funding for assessment activities, the review panel learned about a recent initiative by SKVC on introducing a specific follow-up procedure for the institutional reviews that was declined by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport due to lack of funding. The overall approach for funding assessment procedures from the EU Structural Funds and thus being heavily dependent on their planning period has repeatedly demonstrated its downsides, as another planning period is coming to an end but the regular core activities of SKVC are not and should not be aligned with those planning periods.

Another risk, though very common for public institutions, is the need to rely on one-year plans for the allocation of state funding. The risk could be minimised by developing long term (at least three-year) provisional budget plans that are formally approved and budgeted. In this setup, any changes to one-year allocations could be made only in exceptional cases that are discussed and mutually agreed in advance. In this regard the review panel thinks that it is crucial for the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport to acknowledge the importance of the quality assurance related activities being performed by SKVC consistently and according to previously agreed procedures, as well as the consequences for the reputation of the Lithuanian higher education system that would be created by any interruptions of SKVC capacity.

Although SKVC is fully aware of its current financial situation, there is a belief that the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport would eventually allocate funding or balance SKVC out at the end of each year, as it has more or less happened in the past. This thinking is understandable as the quality of the Lithuanian higher education is a national interest and not a business objective of SKVC.

However, from the organisational perspective the review panel considers that the current funding arrangements are not sustainable and pose considerable risks in the long-term perspective and no visible progress has been achieved since the last review.

The high turnover of the staff poses a significant threat to consistency of processes, and puts additional workload on the middle and senior level management. Although the stakeholders praised SKVC's performance and contribution to a number of important activities, the credit in most cases was given to the senior management or middle level management.

Panel recommendations

1. SKVC should aim to negotiate budgets and a budgetary process with a longer outlook, e.g. for a three-year period.
2. SKVC should urgently investigate alternative funding models in order to mitigate financial risks and develop a clear plan to ensure financial stability.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. SKVC might consider diversifying the income stream through introducing fees for certain assessment procedures in order to balance the dependency from the funding allocations by the ministry.
2. A balance between continuous support for the experienced staff members and empowerment of the newly employed staff is needed in order to ensure that the continuity and consistency of SKVC's expertise does not rely only on a handful of long-term staff members and that a gradual transfer of competencies to the entire staff takes place.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ESG PART 2: EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

In this part the review panel has focused mostly on the revised or newly developed quality assurance procedures that were included in the Terms of Reference for this review:

- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania (modified assessment procedure which has replaced the accreditation of study programmes);
- Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania (modified assessment procedure which has been renewed);
- Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania (newly established procedure with only the simplified version conducted only now);
- Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in Lithuania (newly established procedure, not conducted yet);
- Ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile (newly established procedure, not conducted yet).

The review panel did not find any evidence of other fully developed assessment procedures that would not have been listed above or assessed during the previous review against the ESG in 2017.

As SKVC was found to be partially compliant with the ESG 2.7 during the 2017 review, the review panel has described and analysed all changes related to this standard, in addition to the ones that have direct impact on the revised or newly developed quality assurance procedures.

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 I of the ESG.

Evidence

SKVC has presented a mapping that includes all institutional and programme level assessment procedures carried out by SKVC. A mapping that includes only the assessment procedures within the scope of this review is provided in Table 1. Another mapping that includes the assessment procedures that were not changed is provided in Table 2.

In the mapping SKVC has demonstrated that both the revised and newly established procedures and also the other procedures by SKVC cover all standards of the ESG Part I. The few elements that are not covered are related either to the nature of the assessment procedure (no possibility to provide public information for a programme that has not been launched) or the requirements already set by external regulations (cyclicality of the assessment).

In the SAR, SKVC states that the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with the higher education institution itself and that the internal quality culture of universities and colleges is a primary and essential condition for quality.

SKVC states that the assessment methodologies are prepared in accordance with the Law on Higher Education and Research, ESG, the Ministry's evaluation descriptions and other legal acts regulating the activities of higher education institutions and the external evaluation. The alignment of methodologies with the ESG was ensured during the preparatory stage of all methodologies. SKVC also mentions that the expectations of the ESG in regard to cyclicality of evaluations and publications of the evaluation results have been defined in the national regulatory framework, therefore not repeated in SKVC's methodologies.

According to SKVC, the issues that are emphasised more in the new and revised methodologies, if compared to the previous ones, are - internal quality system of a higher education institution, development of academic staff's competences, recognition of foreign qualifications, the periods of study and the recognition of competencies gained in a way of non-formal and informal learning, as, according to the revised legal framework, the higher education institutions now have the responsibility for recognition of foreign qualifications.

Analysis

SKVC admits it themselves that in Lithuania there is a high degree of national regulation of the internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions, with an emphasis on quality control, and although all ESG principles are implemented, their interpretation varies across higher education institutions.

Although SKVC considers that higher education institutions have the main responsibility for quality assurance, external quality assurance processes are often used as a tool to influence the internal (institutional) arrangements for quality assurance.

In order to analyse the coverage of the ESG Part I the assessment procedures have to be analysed in context with each other.

All higher education institutions in Lithuania are subject to the ex-post institutional review, including the higher education institutions in exile, but the latter have a specifically designed procedure - ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile.

All existing bachelor and master's study programmes in Lithuania are subject to the ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields. The residency studies have become a subject of assessment only recently and separate ex-ante and ex-post procedures have been designed for them.

Each standard of the ESG Part I is covered by one or several criteria in the assessment methodology for each procedure. It has to be noted that the scope of SKVC methodologies is broader than the focus of the ESG Part I. This is also related to the fact that SKVC assessment methodologies are overall very broad and detailed. The programme level methodologies are designed in a way that they cover the content of ESG Part I without major additions. However, in the institutional methodologies, while overall the ESG Part I is covered, there are a number of criteria that have been mapped as related to certain ESG standards but the links are not clearly visible. The review panel also observed that a number of criteria both on programme level and institutional level methodologies have been mapped as related to several ESG standards.

ESG 1.1

As stated by SKVC, the methodologies adopted in 2019 - 2020 have a greater focus on the internal quality assurance systems overall. In the methodologies for institutional evaluation a number of criteria have been identified as applicable to the whole ESG Part I, rather than specific standards only. The criteria evaluated as directly under the ESG 1.1 are related to strategic issues, analysis of statistical data, research, links between research and studies.

On the level of study programmes/study fields the criteria related to ESG 1.1 focus on the evaluation of effectiveness or conformity of certain processes, evaluation of collection of data, use and publication of information on studies, improvement processes and outcomes.

ESG 1.2

The institutional methodologies for the ESG 1.2 cover criteria related to teaching staff, learning resources and different internal policies, not necessarily directly related to the design and approval of programmes but rather to academic integrity, institutional support, for example, provisions and procedures for academic integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination, appeals and ethics, also recognition. The programme/study field level criteria focus on the conformity of the field/ study programme aims, learning outcomes, teaching/learning and assessment methods, subjects/modules with the mission, objectives of activities and strategy of the institution as well as on the evaluation of whether the teaching and learning process takes into account the needs of the students and enables them to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

ESG 1.3

Criteria mapped as related to the ESG 1.3 on the institutional level focus on the internal quality assurance documents, support by higher education institutions to students, teachers, data on student performance, accessibility means for different groups of students, recognition. On the programme/

study field level the link is more direct with focusing particularly on the student centred approach, learning outcomes, conditions for different student groups, teaching-learning process.

ESG 1.4

The newly developed or revised methodologies by SKVC in general put a greater focus on recognition of foreign qualifications, the periods of study and recognition of competences gained in a way of non-formal and informal learning as the responsibility for recognition in Lithuania has recently been moved to higher education institutions. On programme/ study field level they focus on selection and admission of students, support and counselling for students and monitoring student progress.

ESG 1.5

The institutional methodologies address the number and conditions of the staff, as well as the finances and internal quality assurance measures, learning resources, support services. There are also criteria related to the results of graduate surveys, accessibility means to studies and individual approach for different student groups and student mobility. On programme/ study field level this standard is covered by criteria related to evaluation of the totality of the field/ study programme subjects/modules, evaluation of the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system, evaluation of opportunities for students to personalise the structure of study programmes, sufficiency of the scientific component, link between the content of studies and the latest developments in science, art and technology as well as by a special section dedicated to the teaching staff.

ESG 1.6

On the institutional level ESG 1.6 is covered by criteria related to systematic collection and analysis of the performance data, results, availability and accessibility of the information on the performance of the higher education institution as well as the processes for planning, implementation, monitoring, periodic evaluation and development of activities, analysis of the data on employment and publicity and accessibility of the information on conclusions of external reviews. On programme/ study field level the ESG 1.6 is covered by criteria related to suitability and adequacy of the physical, informational and financial resources, procedures for planning and upgrading resources and conditions for ensuring access to study for socially vulnerable groups and students with special needs.

ESG 1.7

On the institutional level there is a significant overlap with the criteria mapped as related to the ESG 1.6. On programme/ study field level the criteria related to ESG 1.7 focus on the evaluation of employability of graduates and graduate career tracking in the study field as well as evaluation of the planning and upgrading of resources needed to carry out studies. There are a number of other related criteria that include the key words “effectiveness”, “collection”, “opinion”.

ESG 1.8

On the institutional level this standard is covered by criteria related to research and art activities (consistency with the mission and strategic aims, level of sufficiency, links with the studies, internationalisation of the research and art activities) as well as with consistent recognition of foreign qualifications, partial studies and prior non-formal and informal learning. Another group of criteria mapped as related to this standard are – the existence of measures used to plan, implement and improve the internal quality assurance arrangements and the established processes for planning, implementation, monitoring, periodic assessment and development of activities (including analysis and use of the feedback results). On the programme/ study field level this standard is covered either by the requirement of the Law on Higher Education and Research or by criteria related to evaluation of the collection, use and publication of information on studies.

ESG 1.9

On the institutional level the standard is covered by criteria related to the consistency of the strategic action plan with the institutional mission and legal documents, existence and public availability of internal quality assurance documents that are consistent with the ESG, application of the external review results for improvement of performance of the higher education institution, publicity and accessibility of the information on conclusions of external reviews, consistency of the study and research (art) activities with the mission and strategic aims of the higher education institution. On the programme/ study field level the main criteria are focused on the evaluation of the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system of the studies.

ESG 1.10

The cyclicity in all evaluation procedures is defined by the Law on Higher Education and Research, either by repeating the same procedure or the subsequent one (in case of ex-ante assessment of residency studies). On programme and study field level there is also a separate criterion related to the evaluation of the compliance of the field and cycle study programme with legal requirements.

It is evident from the information presented in the SAR and the annexes that the assessment methodologies have a very good and detailed coverage of the different elements described in the ESG Part I. One could assume that, if a higher education institution follows the methodologies provided by SKVC, it would be able to develop and demonstrate a well-documented internal quality assurance system for its higher education provision even if such a system did not exist or was not well structured before. However, a question that could be asked in such a case is, are the higher education institutions mature enough to self-reflect and not only replicate what they have been asked for and are these internal systems functioning well on an everyday basis.

The review panel is also aware that it takes time and several assessment cycles with a different focus for the higher education institutions to restructure their way of thinking and become more self-reflective. At the early stages of development or after massive changes to the higher education system it is understandable that there are a number of compliance related issues on the systemic level that SKVC as the national body responsible for quality assurance has to address and solve. However, SKVC and its methodologies play a very important role in shaping the mindset of higher education institutions. It is worth considering how the subsequent cycle of assessments and its methodology could further promote the internal responsibility of the higher education institutions, their ability to reflect on their strategic achievements through a more loose focus on the ESG Part I and demonstrate their own understanding of the ESG, rather than requesting and providing documented proof for all elements covered by different standards. This suggestion is also in line with the conclusion and recommendation of the 2017 review panel for the ESG 2.2 that is provided in the following chapter.

Panel commendation

1. SKVC is commended to have achieved a great level of ESG Part I coverage for all its assessment procedures.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. SKVC might consider loosening the focus on specific standards of the ESG Part I when designing the methodologies for the new assessment cycle.
2. SKVC is encouraged to look for ways of empowering higher education institutions to find their own voice and develop their institutional quality cultures within the rather regulated Lithuanian environment.

Panel conclusion: compliant

Mapping of the assessment procedures that are included in the Terms of Reference for this review

| ESG standard | Ex-post institutional review | Ex-post institutional review of universities in exile | Methodology for External Evaluation of Study Fields (methodology valid from 01/01/2020) | Methodology for External Evaluation of New Residency Study Programmes (ex-ante residency) (valid from 01/12/2020) | Methodology for External Evaluation of Residency Study Programmes (ex-post residency) (valid from 01/12/2020) |
|--|--|---|---|--|---|
| Part I: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance | 1 evaluation area: 1.1.3 criterion; 2 evaluation area: 2.1. indicator, 2.1.1 – 2.1.2; (2.1.3 - 2.1.6) criteria | 2.1. criterion (2.1.1., 2.1.2, 2.1.3, 2.1.6.) | | | |
| 1.1 Policy for quality assurance | 1 evaluation area: 1.1.1, 1.2.3. criteria 2 evaluation area: 2.1.6 criterion 3 evaluation area, 3.1. indicator: 3.1.1 – 3.1.4. criterion | 1.3. criterion (1.3.4); 3.1. criterion 3.1.1 – 3.1.7); 3.2. criterion (3.2.5). | Point 9; Evaluation area 7, indicators 7.1.1.; 7.1.2.; 7.1.3. Evaluation area 4, indicators 4.2.4.; Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.1.1.; 1.1.2. | Evaluation area 5, indicators 5.1. ir 5.2.; Evaluation area 2, indicator 2.2.; Evaluation area 1, indicator 1.1. | Point 8; Evaluation area 5, indicators 5.1. and 5.2.; Evaluation area 2, indicator 2.4.; Evaluation area 1, indicator 1.1. |
| 1.2. Design and approval of programmes | 1.4.1 – 1.4.4., 1.5.4 criteria; 2.1.4, 2.1.5 criteria, 3.1.4. criterion | 2.1. criterion (2.1.5 and 2.1.6) 3.1. criterion (3.1.7); 3.2. criterion (3.2.5) 1.4. criterion (1.4.4.). | Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.1.2.; 1.2.2.; 1.2.3.; Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.1.1. | Points 7.2. and 7.3.; Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.1.; 1.2.; 1.3.; 1.4. | Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.1.; 1.2.; 1.3.; 1.4. |

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|--|--|--|---|--|---|
| 1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment | <i>2.1.1 criterion, 2.1.4 criterion 3.1.4 criterion</i> | <i>1.3. criterion (1.3.2) 3.1. criterion (3.1.4; 3.1.5; 3.1.7.) 3.2. criterion (3.2.6).</i> | <i>Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.2.2.; 1.2.4.; Evaluation area 4, indicators 4.1.1.; 4.1.2.; 4.2.1.; 4.2.5.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.3.; 1.4.; Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.4.; 2.5.; 2.6.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.3.; 1.4.; Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.4.; 2.5.; 2.7.; 2.8.; 2.9.</i> |
| 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification | <i>1.4.1. – 1.4.4. criteria, 2.1.4, 2.1.5 criteria, 3.2.1. and 3.2.2. criteria</i> | <i>3.2. criterion (3.2.2, 3.2.3, 3.2.7, 3.2.8) 1.4. criterion (1.4.1 – 1.4.5.)</i> | <i>Evaluation area 3, indicators 3.1.1.; 3.1.2.; 3.2.1.; 3.2.2.; 3.2.3. Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.2.1.; Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.2.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.1.; 2.3.; Evaluation area 5, indicator 5.2.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.1.; 2.3.; 2.5.; 2.6.; Evaluation area 5, indicator 5.2.</i> |
| 1.5 Teaching staff | <i>1.5.1 – 1.5.4 criteria; 1.4.2, 1.4.4 and 1.4.5 criteria, 2.1.4 criterion, 2.1.2 criterion</i> | <i>1.5. criterion (1.5.1., 1.5.3, 1.5.4) 2.1. criterion (2.1.4) 3.1. criterion (3.1.6, 3.1.7) 3.2. criterion (3.2.5)</i> | <i>Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.2.1; 1.2.2.; 1.2.3.; 1.2.4. Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.1.1.; 2.1.2. Evaluation area 5, indicators 5.1.1.; 5.2.1.; 5.2.2. Evaluation area 7, indicators 7.1.1.; 7.1.4.</i> | <i>Point 8.2. (8.2.2.); Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.2. (1.2.1.; 1.2.2.); 1.4.; Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.4.; 2.5.; 2.8. Evaluation area 3, indicators 3.1.; 3.2.; 3.3.; Evaluation area 5, indicators 5.3.</i> | <i>Point 8.2. (8.2.2.); Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.2. (1.2.1.; 1.2.2.); 1.4.; Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.4.; 2.5.; Evaluation area 3, indicators 3.1.; 3.2.; 3.3.</i> |
| 1.6 Learning resources and student support | <i>1.3. indicator: 1.3.1 – 1.3.2 criteria; 2.1.3. criterion, 2.1.6. criterion</i> | <i>1.3. criterion (1.3.1., 1.3.2, 1.3.3, 1.3.4) 2.1. criterion (2.1.1 – 2.1.3)</i> | <i>Evaluation area 6, indicators 6.1.1.; 6.1.2.; Evaluation area 3, indicator 3.2.2.; Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.1.2.; Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.1.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 4, indicators 4.1.; 4.2.; 4.3.; 4.4.; Evaluation area 2, indicator 2.3.; Evaluation area 5, indicators 5.1. (5.1.3.)</i> | <i>Evaluation area 4, indicators 4.1.; 4.2.; 4.3.; 4.4.; Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.6.; Evaluation area 5, indicators 5.1. (5.1.3.)</i> |
| 1.7 Information management | <i>1.3.2 criterion</i> | <i>1.3. criterion (1.3.2, 1.3.4) 2.1. criterion (2.1.1)</i> | <i>Evaluation area 7, indicator 4.2.3.;</i> | <i>Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.4.; Evaluation area 5, indicator</i> | <i>Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.4.; Evaluation area 5,</i> |

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| | | | Evaluation area 6, indicator 6.1.2.; Evaluation area 7, indicators 7.1.2.; 7.1.3.; 7.1.4. | 5.2.; | indicators 5.2.; 5.3.; 5.4. |
| 1.8 Public information | 3.1 indicator (3.1.1. – 3.1.4 criteria) and 3.2. indicator (3.2.1 – 3.2.2. criteria), 1.5.4 criterion | 2.1. criterion (2.1.2, 2.1.3) 3.1. criterion (3.1.1., 3.1.2) 3.2. criterion (3.2.1) 4.1. criterion | Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.3. | Mandatory by the Law on H&R art. 49, point 2 | Evaluation area 5, indicator 5.4. |
| 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes | 1.1.1; 2.1.1 and 2.1.6 criteria | 1.3. criterion (1.3.4). 3.1. criterion (3.1.1.) | Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.1. | Evaluation area 5, indicator 5.1. | Evaluation area 5, indicator 5.1. |
| 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance | Mandatory by Law on H&R, article 49, point 3 | Mandatory by Law on H&R, article 49, point 3 | Points 11; 48; Evaluation area 1, indicator 1.2.1. Periodicity of the external evaluation (every 7 years) is imposed by the Law on Education and Research (Art. 48, point 3) as well as the Order on the Approval of the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Studies, Evaluation Areas and Indicators (point 5). | Evaluation area 1, indicator 1.2. Periodicity of the external evaluation (every 7 years) is imposed by the Law on Education and Research (Art. 48, point 3) as well as the Order on the Approval of the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Residency Studies (point 4). | Points 15; 43; Evaluation area 1, indicator 1.2. Periodicity of the external evaluation (every 7 years) is imposed by the Law on Education and Research (Art. 48, point 3) as well as the Order on the Approval of the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Residency Studies (point 4). |

Mapping of the assessment procedures that are not included in the Terms of Reference for this review

| ESG standard | Ex-ante institutional review | Ex-post institutional review of higher education institutions abroad | Methodology for the Evaluation of New Study Programmes (methodology valid until 31/12/2019) | Methodology for Evaluation of Higher Education Study Programmes (methodology valid until 31/12/2019) | Methodology for the Evaluation of New Study Programmes (methodology valid from 01/01/2020) |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance | 11.5.1; 11.5.6. and 11.5.7. criteria | <i>information to be analysed:</i> 9.1.1; 9.2.1 | | | |
| 1.1 Policy for quality assurance | 11.1. criterion | 9.2.1; 10.2.1;10.2.3. | 59. Programme aims and learning outcomes, indicator 59.2.; 63. Study process and students' performance assessment (planned), indicator 63.4. | 58. Programme aims and learning outcomes, indicator 58.3.; 62. Study process and students' performance assessment, indicators 62.7.; 62.8.; 62.9.; 62.10. | Evaluation area 7, indicators 7.1.1.; 7.1.2.; Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.2.4.; Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.1.1.; 1.1.2. |
| 1.2. Design and approval of programmes | 11.1.; 11.5.1. | 9.2.1, 10.2.1 | 59. Programme aims and learning outcomes, indicator 59.2.; 64. Programme management, indicator 64.2. | 58. Programme aims and learning outcomes, indicator 58.3.; 63. Programme management, indicators 63.3.; 63.4.; | Points 5.1.; 5.2.; 7.2.1.; Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.1.2.; 1.2.2.; 1.2.3.; Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.1.1. |

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|--|--|--|---|---|---|
| I.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment | <i>11.1 criterion</i> | <i>9.1.1.; 9.2.3;10.2.1.;11.1.3;</i> | <i>63. Study process and students' performance assessment (planned), indicators 63.3.; 63.4.</i> | <i>62. Study process and students' performance assessment, indicators 62.2.; 62.6.; 62.10.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.2.2.; 1.2.4.; Evaluation area 4, indicators 4.1.1.; 4.1.2.; 4.2.5.</i> |
| I.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification | <i>11.1 and 11.6 criteria</i> | <i>9.2.4; 10.2.2; 10.2.3, 11.2.3; 12.5</i> | <i>63. Study process and students' performance assessment (planned), indicator 63.1.; 64. Programme management, indicator 64.1.</i> | <i>62. Study process and students' performance assessment, indicators 62.1.; 62.2; 62.5.; 63. Programme management, indicator 63.6</i> | <i>Evaluation area 3, indicators 3.1.1.; 3.1.2.; 3.2.2.; 3.2.3. Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.2.</i> |
| I.5 Teaching staff | <i>11.1. and 11.3. (11.3.1 – 11.3.3) criteria, 11.4. criterion (11.4.1. – 11.4.4) criteria</i> | <i>9.2.6; 9.2.7; 11.2.2</i> | <i>61. Teaching Staff, indicators 61.2.; 61.4. 60. Curriculum Design, indicators 60.3.; 60.5.</i> | <i>60. Teaching Staff, indicators 60.5.; 60.6.; 59. Curriculum Design, indicators 59.4.; 59.6.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 1, indicators 1.2.1; 1.2.2.; 1.2.3.; 1.2.4. Evaluation area 2, indicators 2.1.1.; 2.1.2. Evaluation area 5, indicators 5.1.1.; 5.2.2.</i> |
| I.6 Learning resources and student support | <i>11.1. criterion; 11.5.6 and 11.5.7. criteria</i> | <i>9.1.5; 9.2.3; 10.1.3;10.1.4; 12.2</i> | <i>61. Teaching Staff, indicators 61.1.; 61.2. 62. Facilities and Learning Resources, indicators 62.1.; 62.2.; 62.3.; 62.4.</i> | <i>60. Teaching Staff, indicators 60.1.; 60.2.; 61. Facilities and Learning Resources, indicators 61.1.; 61.2.; 61.3.; 61.4.; 62. Study process and students' performance assessment, indicators 62.4.; 62.5.</i> | <i>Point 5 (5.3.) Evaluation area 6, indicators 6.1.1.; 6.1.2.; Evaluation area 3, indicator 3.2.2.; Evaluation area 4, indicator 4.1.2.; Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.1.</i> |
| I.7 Information management | <i>11.2; 11.5.1. criteria</i> | <i>9.1.5; 12.5</i> | <i>64. Programme management, indicators 64.1.; 64.2.; 64.3.</i> | <i>63. Programme management, indicators 63.1.; 63.2.; 63.3.; 63.4.; 63.5.; 63.6. 62. Study process and</i> | <i>Evaluation area 6, indicator 6.1.2.; Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.2.</i> |

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| | | | | students' performance assessment, indicator 62.7. | |
| I.8 Public information | <i>11.5.6., 11.5.7. criteria</i> | <i>9.2.1;9.2.3; 10.1.1;10.1.4; 11.1.3; 12.2.</i> | | <i>58. Programme aims and learning outcomes, indicator 58.1.; 63. Programme management, indicators 63.2.; 63.3.; 63.4.; 63.6.</i> | <i>Mandatory by the Law on H&R art. 49, point 2</i> |
| I.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes | <i>The next external evaluation foreseen</i> | <i>9.1.1.</i> | <i>59. Programme aims and learning outcomes, indicators 59.1.; 59.3. 60. Curriculum Design, indicator 60.5. 63. Study process and students' performance assessment (planned), indicator 63.3. 64. Programme management, indicators 64.1.; 64.2.</i> | <i>58. Programme aims and learning outcomes, indicators 58.2.; 58.4.; 59. Curriculum Design, indicator 59.6. 62. Study process and students' performance assessment, indicators 62.6.; 62.8.; 63. Programme management, indicators 63.3.; 63.4.; 63.6.</i> | <i>Evaluation area 7, indicator 7.1.1.</i> |
| I.10 Cyclical external quality assurance | <i>Mandatory by Law on H&R, article 49, point 4</i> | | <i>Periodicity of the external evaluation (every 6 years) was imposed by the Law on Education and Research (Art. 42, point 2) as well as the Procedure for the External Assessment and Accreditation of Study Programmes (point 8).</i> | <i>Periodicity of the external evaluation (every 6 years) was imposed by the Law on Education and Research (Art. 42, point 2) as well as the Procedure for the External Assessment and Accreditation of Study Programmes (point 8).</i> | <i>Point 35; Evaluation area 1, indicator 1.2.1. Periodicity of the external evaluation (every 7 years) is imposed by the Law on Education and Research (Art. 48, point 3) as well as the Order on the Approval of the Procedure for the External Evaluation and Accreditation of Studies, Evaluation Areas and Indicators (point 5).</i> |

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.

2017 review recommendation

The panel recommends SKVC revising its methodologies starting from HEIs' full responsibility for the quality of their programmes. A move from quality control towards an enhancement led peer-review is required, also in support of the development of a quality culture. Furthermore, SKVC should take the initiative for a more integrated approach of programme and institutional evaluations. Further integration and simplification of the various procedures will also help reducing bureaucracy and making procedures more fit for purpose.

Evidence

Since 2017 SKVC has reintroduced the methodology for ex-post institutional review, moved from the assessment of study programmes to the assessment of study fields and introduced three completely new methodologies - ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of residency studies and ex-post institutional review of higher education institutions in exile.

Procedures are approved by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, while the methodologies are approved by the Director of SKVC.

Historically, the external quality assurance system in Lithuania has addressed higher education institutions and bachelor and master's level study programmes. Doctoral study programmes have never been assessed as part of the evaluation processes by SKVC. The assessment of residency studies is a new initiative with the methodology valid from 1st December 2020. A new type of study programmes - short-cycle study programmes - has been introduced recently and SKVC will have the responsibility for its assessment.

The aim for each new or revised quality assurance procedure is defined in the SAR and is very clear.

The ex-post institutional review aims to determine the quality of the higher education institution's performance based on the findings of the external evaluation, to create the preconditions for improvement of the higher education institution'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 higher education institution. It ends with a formal decision on accreditation.

The ex-post institutional review of higher education institutions in exile is aimed specifically at private HEIs that have found refuge in Lithuania from political persecution. The legal consequences of this procedure are the same as for a regular ex-post institutional review - a formal status of an accredited institution and a certain period of accreditation.

The assessment of study fields looks at the quality of the study programmes clustered according to the study fields and separate by levels (bachelor and master's), their compliance with the legal requirements, the provisions of the European Higher Education Area, the commitments of higher education institutions, in order to create preconditions for the improvement of the study programmes, and to foster a quality culture.

Ex-ante and ex-post assessments of residency studies are assessments aimed specifically at residency studies. They were introduced in 2020 but so far only simplified ex-ante assessments have been carried out and all ex-post assessments have been scheduled for not earlier than 2023. The review panel also learned that the assessment of medical residency has been postponed until further notice due to the restructuring of medical residency studies.

The assessment methodologies describe the assessment process, procedures for follow-up, complaints and appeals, evaluation areas, aims, indicators, data and information analysed, procedure and template for reporting on the progress. As for the follow up, mechanisms for it are included in the methodologies for institutional review of higher education institutions, evaluation of higher education institutions in exile, assessment of study fields and evaluation of residency studies. However, the awareness of the follow up between the representatives of the higher education institutions was somewhat contradicting, as explained in section 2.3 of this report.

According to the SAR, the involvement of stakeholders in the development of assessment methodologies takes place through their participation in SKVC advisory bodies, regular discussions, conferences, feedback mechanisms for the higher education institutions and experts and other mechanisms. All stakeholders interviewed by the review panel confirmed their constant involvement in different activities by SKVC, including the design of methodologies, and were knowledgeable about the new developments.

In the 2017 review report, the review panel states that the Ministry has pointed out that SKVC is mainly dealing with quality assurance procedures and less with the enhancement of quality and the development of a quality culture. Currently the aims of the two main assessment procedures - ex-post institutional review of higher education institutions and assessment of study fields - include a strong reference to development and fostering of a quality culture.

A general remark that the review panel would like to make, is about the public availability of the assessment methodologies. While the methodologies for assessment of study fields and ex-post evaluation of higher education are implemented and easily accessible on the SKVC website, the review panel could not locate special sections dedicated to the ex-post institutional evaluation of higher education institutions in exile and ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of residency studies.

Analysis

All assessment methodologies by SKVC have been designed in a way that they do not overlap. Each study programme, except the doctoral programmes, is subject to one assessment procedure on the level of study programmes and, indirectly, a subject to one assessment procedure on the institutional level. The new assessment methodologies fully support this approach, as none of them creates additional burden for the existing higher education institutions and study programmes.

The review panel, however, was curious about the initiative to design the new procedures as separate, rather than incorporating them in the general methodologies for the assessment of higher education institutions or study programmes (at least for ex-ante assessment of programmes).

The review panel learned that the stakeholders have had a significant impact on the development of these methodologies. While the involvement of stakeholders in the design of methodologies is very important and commendable, the review panel questioned whether the initiative for this setup came from SKVC itself, as their view on the overall setup of the external quality assurance framework, or rather from the stakeholders.

A contradictory piece of evidence that questions whether the feedback from all stakeholders is really taken into account and whether there is some influence that is higher/ more significant than others, however, is the introduction of the new 5-point assessment scale that was hardly supported by any

stakeholders interviewed by the review panel. This issue will be explored more in section 2.5 of this report.

As for the assessment of medical residency studies, the review panel was surprised to learn that the assessment methodologies were designed and then the assessment was postponed until the study programmes are restructured according to the tiered competences model established by the Ministry of Health. The review panel wonders whether the decisions to establish a new model and to perform assessment had been coordinated with each other.

Another issue that the review panel questioned, is whether the concept of assessment of study fields has met the expectations set for it. It has been started in 2020 only but the first outcomes already show that in a number of cases it is not that different from the assessment of separate study programmes because the assessment takes place on the level of each higher education institution, separately for the bachelor and master's level and smaller institutions tend to have one or very few programmes on each level in every study field.

In the light of changes to the external quality assurance framework that are foreseen after 2025 when the current assessment cycle ends, the review panel asks to consider whether all separate assessment procedures will still be fit for purpose. As the assessment of residency studies has been introduced only recently, the review panel assumes that a full round of ex-post procedures will not be completed until 2025 and this procedure will need to be incorporated also in the new framework.

Overall, in the light of the 2017 review recommendation and also the concerns of the review panel that are raised in the section 2.1, the review panel wonders whether all procedures can really achieve all the aims set for them. This is especially true for the procedures on the institutional and study field level and for the aims related to developing and fostering a culture of quality, given the highly prescriptive methodologies, as explained in the section 2.1.

In relation to this, the review panel questions whether establishment of a number of separate assessment procedures is an effective approach and whether the expectations of all stakeholders could be covered on the level of the SKVC overall portfolio rather than by every separate procedure.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. SKVC could further support higher education institutions in having the main responsibility for their internal quality assurance and that SKVC has only a supportive external role. This could be fully embedded in all activities by SKVC.
2. SKVC is advised to carefully consider on how different stakeholder interests can best be served on the overall level of the agency's operations (e.g. by differentiating the methodological portfolio with regard to the primary functions such as enhancement or compliance), without carrying this issue into the design of each single procedure.
3. SKVC is encouraged to revise its portfolio of assessment procedures and find a way of simplifying it.
4. SKVC could communicate the methodologies on ex-post institutional evaluation of higher education institutions in exile and ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of residency studies on the SKVC website in a more clear way.

Panel conclusion: compliant

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

Evidence

As described earlier, all assessment procedures by SKVC take place according to a general description approved by the Ministry of Education and Science and methodology that is elaborated by SKVC based on this description. Both the description and the methodology includes the main procedural steps.

According to the information presented in the SAR, all newly developed and revised assessment procedures by SKVC include all four procedural steps recommended by ESG 2.3. The only exception is the simplified approach ex-ante evaluation of residency studies with the possibility to perform assessment as a fully desk-based administrative procedure - without a site visit by an external expert group and without expert report,

However, there is a slight contradiction in when exactly this simplified approach would be applied. The methodology for evaluation of new residency studies states that the higher education institution, which provides the residency study programme in the field where the residency studies are not evaluated and accredited, shall apply to the SKVC for a simplified evaluation of the residency study programme. On the other hand, the SAR states that the simplified evaluation is only applied if the higher education institution is already implementing studies in the same study field as the new residency study programme proposed.

During the site visit the review panel learned about some inconsistencies in the arrangements for follow-up, therefore the review panel explored this issue in detail.

The methodologies for conducting institutional review of a higher education institution and assessment of study fields state that the follow-up activities are the responsibility of the higher education institutions. The stages of the follow-up are the following - plan for eliminating the shortcomings identified during the self-evaluation and external review that has to be announced not later than within 6 months as of the date of entry into force of the decision on the accreditation, progress report on the implementation of recommendations that is announced on the website and submitted to SKVC. Upon the receipt of this report, SKVC shall analyse it and provide feedback to the higher education institution in the form of a meeting. The methodology also foresees that SKVC shall monitor the implementation of the action plan at least once during the accreditation period. The SAR states that the first progress reports following the evaluation of a field of study should be submitted to SKVC in early 2022. The SAR also states that, 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.

The methodology for evaluation of new residency studies foresees that the higher education institution prepares a progress report on the implementation of expert recommendations and submit it to SKVC at least 1,5 years after the registration of the study programme. After receiving the report, SKVC shall analyse it and provide feedback on the report as well as publish it on the SKVC website. In case of

existing residency study programmes, the follow-up process is similar to the one for institutional reviews and study fields - with a plan for development and elimination of shortcomings, submission of a progress report to SKVC, analysis of the progress report and feedback to the higher education institution by SKVC. In case of a short-period accreditation (3 years) the SKVC has to submit the progress report to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

The review panel did not learn of any specific follow-up methodology for the assessment of higher education institutions in exile.

In its report on substantive changes in 2021 the EQAR Register Committee had flagged the issue with the ex-post institutional review of the higher education institutions in exile. The EQAR Register Committee had emphasised the need to ensure a separation between the decisions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the quality-related analyses and decisions of SKVC. In this assessment procedure the decision is based on four evaluation areas where three areas are evaluated by an expert group composed by SKVC and for the fourth area (impact for the region and country) a report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is considered. The advisory body of SKVC (Commission of Higher Education Institutions' Review) would consider only the report by the expert group but the SKVC director would consider the whole evidence, including the report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Analysis

The methodology for all the newly developed or revised assessment procedures implemented by SKVC includes all four steps foreseen by the ESG 2.3 - self-assessment, external assessment with a site visit, report by external evaluators and follow-up.

In the opinion of the review panel the only exception - ex-ante assessment of residency studies - does not undermine SKVC's compliance with this standard as the application of a simplified approach is carefully considered and applicable only to certain institutions. However, there has been a slight contradiction in the evidence therefore this judgement of the review panel is only valid if the correct evidence is that the higher education institution proposing residency studies has to already implement this study field - meaning that the study field and/or the other programmes in the study field have undergone assessment with all four steps.

As already mentioned in section 2.2, the review panel received contradicting information on the follow up processes. Judging from the methodologies, the follow-up is foreseen in all assessment procedures. However, the message received from higher education institutions during the site visit was confusing - they were not clear about the structure of the follow-up and it seemed that the follow-up process was still under development. From the SAR and during the discussions with SKVC staff, the review panel learned that the initial plan for the follow up for institutional reviews was more elaborate and included a discussion for the follow-up report with the experts. This initiative, however, was turned down by the Ministry due to lack of funding. While currently the methodology foresees only submission of plans and reports, it is not clear whether and when this additional step would be implemented. The statement included in the SAR signals that SKVC is still considering it. The review panel is, however, of the opinion that follow-up procedure has to be designed at the initial stage of the assessment methodology as an integral part of it and by ensuring that it supports the aims defined for the certain assessment. It is important that the follow-up is introduced as a whole and not that some elements of it are introduced well after the assessment procedure has been launched. The review panel would like to bring to the attention the fact that, according to the SAR, the follow-up stage for institutional evaluations was carefully designed as a part of the methodology but was later removed following the negotiations with the Ministry. The review panel has provided its considerations in this regard in sections 2.2 and 3.5 of this report.

The review panel chose to address the issue with the higher education institutions in exile here rather than in the section 2.5 because the final decision on accreditation of these institutions is taken by SKVC in such a way not undermining the autonomy of SKVC. The issue explored by the review panel is the fact that the decision is not entirely based on a report resulting from external assessment, but also other sources. The review panel learned that the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is strictly limited to one evaluation area out of four - impact for the region and country (of origin) - that could be challenging for the SKVC expert groups to assess and is not a core element in other methodologies by SKVC. Therefore, the review panel is confident that the responsibilities of SKVC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are clearly separated and this division helps to achieve the aim defined for this procedure.

Panel recommendation

- I. Follow-up should be developed as an integral part of all procedures and ensure that it is clearly communicated to the higher education institutions at the beginning of the process.

Panel suggestion for further improvement

- I. SKVC should clarify the conditions for applying the simplified approach for ex-ante evaluation of residency studies.

Panel conclusion: compliant

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).

Evidence

SKVC operates an expert database that currently includes over 4000 experts. In its assessment procedures, SKVC relies primarily on international experts therefore the database includes experts from a large number of different countries.

The expert teams for assessment procedures are established by always including academic experts and representatives of the students and, in most cases, representatives of the professional world. The proposal of expert groups is the responsibility of each assessment coordinator; appointments of experts are done by the Standing Committee, which decides on the suitability of a particular expert for the evaluation, and determines the overall order in which the experts shall be invited.

All experts involved in expert groups must declare the absence of conflict of interest and act independently. The adherence to these principles is ensured by the expert contracts and supporting documentation.

The expert teams for institutional assessments and assessment of study fields are dominated by international experts while the ex-ante assessments are performed exclusively by local experts. This would be true also for the ex-ante assessment of residency studies, once the full procedures with expert involvement take place.

SKVC has established a number of mechanisms to support the experts - mandatory training for all experts before the site visit, support by a designated assessment coordinator to each expert group, written assessment methodologies, templates for the expert reports.

The review experts interviewed by the review panel confirmed that they receive up to date information in a timely manner and that the information provided is sufficient in order to perform their duties.

Analysis

The review panel was impressed by the composition of the SKVC expert database that covers a large number of disciplines and includes international experts from a large number of countries. From the publicly available compositions of the expert groups the review panel can conclude that SKVC has managed to attract highly qualified experts with significant achievements in their academic and professional life. The affiliations of experts indicate that they have been carefully selected for each assessment procedure/ area, even for the very specific study fields. . However, the review panel was not convinced about whether the largesse of the database (around 4000 experts) is fit for purpose. Such a large database requires constant maintenance. and from the discussions the review panel learned that there is no one designated staff member who would be responsible for that. Also, the review panel did not find evidence of any formal policy for maintaining and updating the database. The review panel learned that assessment coordinators are primarily responsible for selecting experts for their procedures and, as there is a high turnover of the junior staff who usually serve as assessment coordinators, there did not seem to be an institutional memory related to experts. The assessment coordinators interviewed by the review panel admitted that, while composing their expert groups, they have encountered a number of experts who are not active and even might have died, but are still in the database or student experts who are no longer students.

During the site visit, the review panel learned about the issues with the local (Lithuanian) experts selected to the review panels and that there would be a strong preference from the higher education institutions to have more international experts than local experts, because of the small and close academic community in Lithuania.

In this light, the review panel questions why SKVC has not foreseen mandatory participation of international experts in the expert panels when developing the new methodology for evaluation of residency studies. This is especially important given the fact that medical studies are only implemented in few Lithuanian universities and selection of Lithuanian experts could with a high possibility end up in complaints about the composition of the expert group.

Panel commendations

1. SKVC is commended for the genuine involvement of stakeholder representatives of students and professional community in assessment procedures.
2. SKVC is commended for the extensive use of international experience in expert panels.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. The review panel suggests that SKVC defines clear responsibilities, policies and processes for maintaining and updating the expert database.
2. The review panel suggests that SKVC updates the current expert database in order to ensure that only active experts are included.
3. SKVC could consider mandatory participation of international experts in all assessment procedures, in particular, the evaluation of residency studies.

Panel conclusion: compliant

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.

2017 review recommendations

It is necessary to reinforce the trust in the outcomes of external evaluations performed by experts with the assistance of SKVC staff, and to recognise the director's responsibility in taking consistent and evidence-based decisions. As a consequence, SKVC needs to reconsider the position of the advisory commissions in the decision-making process.

SKVC could further support experts in applying criteria consistently by providing definitions for the scores, illustrative examples and assessment rules. These should be included in the methodologies and guidelines.

Evidence

The methodology developed for each assessment procedure also describes the process for decision taking.

Although the decisions on accreditation are formally taken by SKVC Director, there are two designated advisory bodies that propose decisions - Commission of Higher Education Institutions' Review and the Study Evaluation Commission. The arrangement of the Director signing decisions is related to the status of SKVC as a public administration institution and the fact that SKVC has to issue individual administrative acts for the assessments.

The 2017 review panel questioned the balance of responsibilities between the director and advisory bodies in the decision-making process and asked to reconsider their roles.

As a response to that, SKVC states that despite decisions being signed by one person, there is a multi-stage procedure in order to ensure the objectivity and validity of the decisions taken. It includes the draft report being pre-screened by the SKVC evaluation coordinator, possibility for the higher education institution to provide comments on factual errors in the report and the requirement for the expert group to review and consider them and the possibility for the advisory body to either endorse the final report or to return it back to the expert group.

The advisory bodies act according to their Statutes that describe the general operating principles, functions, rights, duties and responsibilities and organisation of meetings. The Statutes also provide guidance on how the decisions should be taken from the procedural perspective. The principles for suggesting the outcomes by the expert group and advisory bodies are described in the methodology for each assessment procedure. However, the review panel did not learn of any guidance for the advisory bodies in regard to ensuring consistency of their decisions.

The 2017 review panel also recommended supporting experts in applying criteria consistently by providing definitions for the scores, illustrative examples and assessment rules. Based on this feedback, SKVC has reconsidered its assessment scale and introduced a 5-point scale with the following ratings:

- excellent – 5 points – the area is rated exceptionally well in the national context and internationally;

- very good – 4 points – the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks;
- good – 3 points – the area is being developed systematically, without any major drawbacks;
- satisfactory – 2 points – the area meets the minimum requirements, and there are drawbacks that must be addressed;
- unsatisfactory – 1 point – the area does not meet the minimum requirements, there are fundamental drawbacks.

The 4-point assessment scale is currently applied only for ex-post evaluation of study programmes abroad and ex-post institutional reviews of higher education institutions abroad.

Analysis

Despite the concerns raised by the previous review panel, the 2021 review panel did not evidence any cases where the decision of the SKVC Director would differ from the suggestion by the advisory bodies. The criteria for outcomes are defined in methodologies approved by the SKVC Director and there is no possibility to change the outcome, if no proper justification has not been provided. Based on this and the overall setup of SKVC as a public administration institution that has to adhere to certain rules of operation, the review panel does not consider that these arrangements for decision making create any threats for SKVC operation. Moreover, the review panel is of the opinion that, given the strict framework for operation, SKVC has put a significant effort in ensuring that the overall decision-making structure and other arrangements eliminate the risks that the decisions cannot be jeopardized.

The review panel, however, considers that the other recommendation made by the 2017 review panel on ensuring consistency of expert work by providing definitions for the scores, illustrative examples and assessment rules has not been fully understood or interpreted in a way that resolves the issue at hand.

Since 2017, SKVC has reconsidered the assessment scale and created a new 5-point scale that is currently used in all assessments. This scale foresees 5 possible marks with 5 (excellent) indicates exceptional performance in the local context and internationally. As each expert group is established specifically for one assessment (either on programme, study field or institutional level), the review panel questions the ability of the expert group to perform a local or moreover an international comparison. The review panel is also of the opinion that it is difficult to differentiate between the points 3 and 4 of the assessment scale where 3 (good) is assigned when the area is being developed systematically, without any major drawbacks while 4 points (very good) when the area is rated very well in the national context and internationally, without any drawbacks. Also, the representatives of the expert pool who have had experience with the new scale expressed their view that it is often hard to differentiate between these marks. In this context, the review panel questions whether there is any importance for the higher education institutions which mark is assigned as long as the overall result is positive. During the interviews, the review panel received opinions that it is the final result that matters the most and that the higher education institution would never make an appeal against the assessment of a certain area if the overall result is acceptable. If this is true for other institutions, too, the review panel must conclude that the assessment scale has not fulfilled its potential.

While the review panel appreciates the involvement of stakeholders in SKVC activities in general, the review panel was surprised to hear that the stakeholders (higher education institutions and experts) criticise the introduction of the 5-point scale, indicating that their concerns have not been taken on board earlier.

During the meeting with the representatives of advisory bodies the review panel learned that they, too, have issues with interpreting the new 5-point scale and ensuring consistency of decisions in

relation to assigning points to assessment areas. This could be explained by the lack of a “book of precedents” or a similar tool for guidance.

The review panel strongly recommends reviewing the assessment scale with involvement of the main stakeholders to ensure that it is fit for purpose and to avoid a reference to excellence in the local context and internationally as long as there is no consistent mechanism for benchmarking that could be used by all expert groups. Instead of trying to recognise “excellence” through the assessment scale, it could be possible to highlight it as an example of best practice that is mentioned in the expert report and later included in summary of results or thematic analysis performed by SKVC.

Panel recommendations

1. SKVC should re-consider the 5-point assessment scale in the light of the feedback received from the stakeholders, especially in regard to the inclusion of the benchmarking element and clear differentiation between the marks.
2. SKVC should develop clear criteria and guidelines that support a coherent interpretation of the scale for all stakeholders, especially the expert groups and advisory bodies.

Panel suggestion for further improvement

1. SKVC could consider developing a “book of precedents” or a similar tool for ensuring the consistency of decisions proposed by the expert groups and advisory bodies.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

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.

Evidence

All reports for the completed assessment procedures are publicly available. SKVC makes use of both the SKVC website and also AIKOS public portal.

The review reports on higher education institutions are currently published on the SKVC website only, while the up to date reports on specific study programmes and study fields are published on the State Register of Studies which is available through AIKOS. SKVC on its website also states that due to technical issues the results on the assessment of study fields for 2020 - 2021 are available on AIKOS only. The review reports are always accompanied by the decision on accreditation.

There is also a database on programme level reports on the SKVC website https://www.skvc.lt/default/lt/valuations?filter_submit=1. The SKVC website includes overview (summary) reports on the assessment of study fields both for study fields that were assessed according to the new methodology designed specifically for study field assessment and also for procedures where study programmes were the unit of assessment. Based on the information provided during the site visit, these summary reports are intended for the use of SKVC and the Ministry.

Between 2020 and 2022 SKVC was a member of the DEQAR CONNECT project consortium. As of March 2022, 1402 review reports by SKVC have been uploaded to the DEQAR database. These

reports represent four activities carried out by SKVC - ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields, ex-post institutional review in Lithuania, ex-post study programmes evaluation abroad (ongoing procedures), external evaluation and accreditation of study programmes in Lithuania (discontinued procedure).

Analysis

The review panel confirms that the reports resulting from all assessment procedures by SKVC and the related accreditation decisions are publicly available. The review panel has based this conclusion on a selection of reports on study programmes, study fields and higher education institutions that were selected randomly. SKVC's active participation in the DEQAR CONNECT project confirms SKVC's commitment to publish assessment reports to a wider audience.

However, the review panel would like to note that the judgement on the clarity of the available information depends on the intended target group of the reports. Even if all the reports are published, some are published on the national database, some on the SKVC website and some information published on the SKVC website is outdated. While these arrangements might be fully clear to a representative of the Lithuanian higher education community, for a non-familiar and/or international reader the overall setup is rather challenging to navigate, especially if not supported by the information provided in SAR or a similar document.

The review panel learned that the summary reports are currently prepared for the use of SKVC and the Ministry as the main users. However, these reports are also published on the SKCV website therefore available for a wider society. The review panel was told that these reports are prepared by the chairperson of the expert group and reviewed by the evaluation coordinator. From the examples available on the SKVC website, the review panel learned that while these reports are supposed to be a compilation of the main strengths, weaknesses and recommendations, they do not follow a unified structure and are sometimes missing recommendations from the original reports (for example, <https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97s%20u%C5%B4tikrinimas/Vertinimo%20rezultatai/2022/General%20Electrical%20Engineering%20study%20field%20overview%202021.pdf> and https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/Kokyb%C4%97s%20u%C5%B4tikrinimas/Vertinimo%20rezultatai/2022/Nutrition%20General%20study%20field%20overview_2021.pdf). The review panel is of the opinion that these summary reports are a strong tool that SKVC could use for informing the higher education community about the results, conducting thematic analysis and negotiations with different stakeholders. However, in order to do that, the review panel suggests that the purpose of these summary reports is clearly defined, there is a unified template for producing them and either it is done by a designated SKVC staff member or the expert group is provided constant support while producing it in order to ensure consistency.

Panel commendation

1. SKVC's active participation in the DEQAR CONNECT project and commitment to publish reports to a wide audience.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. SKVC could review the aim and introduce a template for the summary reports so that they could be used as a basis for thematic reports and disseminated to a wider audience than the Ministry and SKVC staff.
2. SKVC could adjust its publication practice and assure transparency regarding the publication of all the reports on the website to ensure that all reports are even more easily accessible to the stakeholders.

Panel conclusion: compliant

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.

2017 review recommendation

SKVC should supply a more specific complaints procedure as part of its quality assurance system. Information about the complaints procedure should be made easily accessible to HEIs.

Evidence

In the SAR SKVC states that in the period 2017-2021, a total of 21 appeals were received (10 appeals against ex-post study programme evaluation, performed until 2018 (from 295 where the decision had been made); 10 appeals against ex-ante study programme evaluation (from 186 where the decision had been made); 1 appeal against ex-post evaluation of the field of study (from 103 where the decision had been made)). Of these, 16 were rejected, upholding the SKVC's decision, and 5 were partially upheld. In partially upholding the appeals, the Appeals Commission ordered SKVC 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.

SKVC also states that, in its 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.

SKVC has taken several steps as a response to 2017 recommendation and remarks by the EQAR Register Committee. As of 2020, the SKVC'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 higher education institution to lodge a complaint with the SKVC during the external evaluation process, prior to the adoption of the evaluation decision. This complaint would be lodged against the activities and/or omissions of the participants in the evaluation process and the procedures. The review panel, however, could not find such a possibility described in the methodology for evaluations of higher education institutions. In addition to policy for complaints related to assessment procedures, in 2021 SKVC has made a separate provision for the submission and handling of complaints and reports from members of the academic community.

SKVC still implements all procedural steps during the assessment procedure itself, in order to avoid complaints at a later stage. These steps were described in the 2017 review report, in particular, the possibility for higher education institutions to submit a request to replace a certain member of the expert group,

One issue that remains unsolved is the appeals process for higher education institutions in exile. In the 2021 substantive changes report the EQAR Register Committee had underlined that higher education institutions in exile should also be allowed to question the formal outcome of the report with SKVC and not only with the Ministry. Both at the time of reporting the substantive changes and also in the SAR for this review the SKVC states that higher education institutions in exile may lodge a complaint to SKVC 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 they disagree with the SKVC decision on the external evaluation, an appeal has to be lodged with the Ministry.

Analysis

The appeals procedure in SKVC is well established. There is a designated permanent body in charge of it that has been operating on a regular basis. During the site visit, the review panel was convinced that overall the process of submitting and reviewing appeals functions well.

The number of appeals received by SKVC has been rather low compared to the overall number of procedures carried out by SKVC. However, the review panel questions whether this number could be reduced even further.

The review panel came to this opinion based on the discussions with the Appeals Commission where an opinion was raised that in the Lithuanian context appeal is considered more like a demonstration of attitude than an actual appeal to the result. The review panel learned that in case of appeals, each case is scrutinised by the Appeals Commission not only in relation to procedural aspects but also to the content of the assessment, meaning that the Appeals Commission would repeat the work done by the expert group and the respective advisory body. In this regard, the review panel considers that the competencies of the Appeals Commission could be used in a more effective way, especially in cases where the higher education institution is aware of the final result already at the time of submitting the appeal. The review panel assumes that this also might be related to the currently static nature of the follow up process and, in the future, also to the fact that for some assessment procedures the full follow up process has not been designed together with the whole methodology (i.e. institutional evaluation). A possibility to reflect on the review results during an immediate follow up, preferably with the involvement of external experts, could decrease the cases of appeals even more and minimise the use of appeals as a form of expressing opinion at a later stage of the review.

As for the complaints procedure, the review panel commends the introduction of a formal policy for complaints in 2020. However, the fact that there have been no cases of complaints according to this policy clearly signals that there are other, more effective channels for expressing concerns and the concerns have been addressed that way. During the site visit, the higher education institutions expressed overall satisfaction with the way how SKVC operates and emphasised that the SKVC staff has been very accessible and supportive. This also relates to the overall opinion that most of the matters that could end up in complaints are solved through personal contact during each assessment procedure.

The review panel also would like to highlight the issue with the appeals process for higher education institutions in exile. As the decision on accreditation is taken by SKVC, the higher education institutions should also have the possibility to appeal to SKVC. The situation where a decision is taken by SKVC but the appeal is dealt with by another body, in a framework where there is a legal possibility to appeal directly to SKVC, could also be considered as a threat to SKVC autonomy.

Panel commendation

1. Development of a complaints policy both for the higher education institutions in relation to assessment procedures and also for the academic community in general.

Panel suggestions for further improvement

1. SKVC could make efforts to ensure the possibility for higher education institutions in exile to contest the final evaluation outcome with the SKVC instead of the Ministry.
2. SKVC could streamline the assessment methodologies, to ensure that all methodologies include information about lodging a complaint.
3. SKVC could consider the appeals process in the context of the current arrangements for the follow-up, to minimise the possibility that issues that could be solved during a proper and consistent follow-up stage end up in appeals.

Panel conclusion: compliant

ENHANCEMENT AREAS

ESG 2.2

The external quality assurance framework implemented by SKVC functions in certain evaluation cycles. At the time of the previous ENQA review the previous assessment cycle was still ongoing. Now SKVC is in the middle of the current cycle (2020 – 2025) and a new cycle is planned to start from 2025. As evident from the 2017 SAR and the 2017 review report, the main expectations from each new review cycle have been related to decreasing the costs and administrative burden for those involved.

However, from the information presented, the review panel cannot conclude that in this cycle there has been much progress compared to the previous one. The costs of assessment processes are still high and the new concept - assessment of study fields - in terms of workload and fragmentation in a number of cases has not proven to be very different from the previous evaluation of separate study programmes.

SKVC admits that one of the main challenges is to balance the accountability and enhancement dimensions of evaluation processes and there has to be a consensus by stakeholders. In the case of SKVC, the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is vital, as SKVC is a public institution accountable to the Ministry and also the Ministry is the main source of funding for SKVC. The review panel has already noted that the context in which SKVC operates is challenging. From one side SKVC has a national mandate and impressive portfolio of activities, making it a very powerful player. From the other side, the power is relative, given the different legal constraints and the strong role of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.

The review panel certainly supports the approach where with each assessment cycle the external quality assurance system becomes more enhancement and less accountability oriented. While accountability might be the major interest of the government, it cannot be the main leading force of quality assurance in a mature higher education system. SKVC has to support the autonomy of the higher education institutions and offer more freedom and flexibility to those institutions that have successfully passed the accountability-related requirements set for them. By studying the case example of SKVC, the review panel has come to a conclusion that it is very difficult and nearly impossible to serve several, often conflicting aims (like accountability and development of a quality culture) with one assessment procedure. Therefore, the specific purpose of each assessment procedure should be carefully re-considered. From the other side, re-defining the purpose of every assessment procedure should not result in further fragmentation of the quality assurance system. The portfolio of assessment procedures by SKVC is already extensive and a way for simplifying it needs to be found.

Higher education is a public good and so should be quality assurance. However, this status of a public good at any cost should not come with endangered independence neither for the higher education institutions nor for the quality assurance agency. It is important for the national authorities to acknowledge this and create a stable environment in which the quality assurance agency could operate according to the principles accepted in the European Higher Education Area. The stability could be achieved either by granting stable funding to the quality assurance agency or by the quality assurance agency itself setting clear preconditions for its operation and securing the funding in other ways. If sufficient and stable funding in the long-term perspective from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports cannot be secured, SKVC has to take steps on its own.

ESG 2.5

Although in 2017 this standard was evaluated as substantially compliant by ENQA and as fully compliant by EQAR, based on the developments that have taken place between 2017 and 2021, the current review panel has evaluated this standard only as partially compliant.

The review panel has formulated a number of recommendations and suggestions for further development in the respective section of the review report, as a part of compliance assessment. As already explained in this section, although the structures for ensuring the consistency of outcomes are in place, the methodological approach that SKVC has chosen has not been well thought over and has not been supported by the stakeholders that are subject to it.

In the opinion of the review panel the issue with consistency of evaluation outcomes, namely the evaluation scale, is far from being resolved. From the observations by the review panel, the changes introduced in the new and revised methodologies might even lead to a more difficult situation than the one described by the 2017 review panel. One challenge is the design of the assessment scale itself with insufficient distinction between the levels and also the ambition to recognise excellence through the scale. Another challenge is the actual application of the scale by those involved and the lack of clear guidelines for the experts and advisory bodies that could eventually result in significant inconsistencies. The existence of these challenges was confirmed by all groups of SKVC representatives that the review panel met - experts, members of advisory bodies and staff. Therefore, the review panel urges SKVC to re-consider the scale and support it with clear interpretative guidelines on the assessment criteria for all parties involved.

Another issue that is indirectly related to this standard is the staff fluctuation that happens among the junior staff that usually serve as assessment coordinators. While the current scale itself has proven to be challenging to interpret, the frequent changes in the junior staff who support the expert teams create an even greater challenge for the senior staff and SKVC in general. There is a constant need to empower and support the staff responsible for coordination of assessment procedures to ensure that the input provided by SKVC is solid and consistent.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The review panel acknowledges that SKVC operates in a highly regulated environment with an influence from a number of actors and institutions shaping the system, including several ministries. Despite the heavily regulated higher education system, Lithuania has demonstrated its full commitment to the values and initiatives promoted by the European Higher Education Area and could be named as an example for other countries in a number of areas.

The review panel congratulates SKVC for its achievements in the development of an ESG-compatible higher education quality assurance system in Lithuania and also for the significant role that SKVC has in the higher education sector in general. This was confirmed by the trust of a number of stakeholders.

However, the review panel must note that quality assurance systems are closely linked with the general level of autonomy of the higher education systems and autonomy is one of the core values of higher education. The level of autonomy of the quality assurance body mirrors the general level of autonomy within the higher education system and quality assurance in higher education has to primarily be about ensuring trust, not about accountability, efficiency and processes.

The actors who are shaping the higher education system have to make sure that the quality assurance body has all the necessary conditions for creating and maintaining trust - no financial indirect steering, no constant dependence on structural funds, no pressure to take on additional tasks that could influence its capacity. In addition, the quality assurance body itself has to enjoy trust from those who have delegated this function to it.

It is understandable that the higher education system is changing but in this challenging environment there is an even greater need for a stable and strong quality assurance body. Stability cannot be achieved by constant changes, nor are the constant changes healthy for the system. The integrity and operability of the quality assurance body has to be regularly ensured and the quality assurance body has to have sufficient autonomy to pursue its mission.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

1. SKVC is commended to have achieved a great level of ESG Part I coverage for all its assessment procedures.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

2. SKVC is commended for the genuine involvement of stakeholder representatives of students and professional community in assessment procedures.
3. SKVC is commended for the extensive use of international experience in expert panels.

ESG 2.6 Reporting

4. SKVC's active participation in the DEQAR CONNECT project and commitment to publish reports to a wide audience.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

5. Development of a complaints policy both for the higher education institutions in relation to assessment procedures and also for the academic community in general.

ESG 3.3 Independence

6. The review panel commends the genuine involvement of SKVC's stakeholders in the development of assessment methodologies.
7. The review panel commends the efforts by SKVC to continuously ensure a fully independent internal organisational structure.

OVERVIEW OF JUDGEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

1. Follow-up should be developed as an integral part of all procedures and ensure that it is clearly communicated to the higher education institutions at the beginning of the process.

ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

2. SKVC should re-consider the 5-point assessment scale in the light of the feedback received from the stakeholders, especially in regard to the inclusion of the benchmarking element and clear differentiation between the marks.
3. SKVC should develop clear criteria and guidelines that support a coherent interpretation of the scale for all stakeholders, especially the expert groups and advisory bodies.

ESG 3.5 Resources

4. SKVC should aim to negotiate budgets and a budgetary process with a longer outlook, e.g. for a three-year period.
5. SKVC should urgently investigate alternative funding models in order to mitigate financial risks and develop a clear plan to ensure financial stability.

In light of the documentary and oral evidence considered by it, the review panel is satisfied that, in the performance of its functions, SKVC is in compliance with the ESG.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

1. SKVC might consider loosening the focus on specific standards of the ESG Part I when designing the methodologies for the new assessment cycle.
2. SKVC is encouraged to look for ways of empowering higher education institutions to find their own voice and develop their institutional quality cultures within the rather regulated Lithuanian environment.

ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

3. SKVC could further support higher education institutions in having the main responsibility for their internal quality assurance and that SKVC has only a supportive external role. This could be fully embedded in all activities by SKVC.
4. SKVC is advised to carefully consider on how different stakeholder interests can best be served on the overall level of the agency's operations (e.g. by differentiating the methodological portfolio with regard to the primary functions such as enhancement or compliance), without carrying this issue into the design of each single procedure.
5. SKVC is encouraged to revise its portfolio of assessment procedures and find a way of simplifying it.
6. SKVC could communicate the methodologies on ex-post institutional evaluation of higher education institutions in exile and ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of residency studies on the SKVC website in a more clear way.

ESG 2.3 Implementing processes

7. SKVC should clarify the conditions for applying the simplified approach for ex-ante evaluation of residency studies.

ESG 2.4 Peer-review experts

8. The review panel suggests that SKVC defines clear responsibilities, policies and processes for maintaining and updating the expert database.
9. The review panel suggests that SKVC updates the current expert database in order to ensure that only active experts are included.
10. SKVC could consider mandatory participation of international experts in all assessment procedures, in particular, the evaluation of residency studies.

ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

11. SKVC could consider developing a "book of precedents" or a similar tool for ensuring the consistency of decisions proposed by the expert groups and advisory bodies.

ESG 2.6 Reporting

12. SKVC could review the aim and introduce a template for the summary reports so that they could be used as a basis for thematic reports and disseminated to a wider audience than the Ministry and SKVC staff.

13. SKVC could adjust its publication practice and assure transparency regarding the publication of all the reports on the website to ensure that all reports are even more easily accessible to the stakeholders.

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

14. SKVC could make efforts to ensure the possibility for higher education institutions in exile to contest the final evaluation outcome with the SKVC instead of the Ministry.
15. SKVC could streamline the assessment methodologies, to ensure that all methodologies include information about lodging a complaint.
16. SKVC could consider the appeals process in the context of the current arrangements for the follow-up, to minimise the possibility that issues that could be solved during a proper and consistent follow-up stage end up in appeals.

ESG 3.3 Independence

17. The review panel suggests that SKVC reflects on the current and future role and responsibilities of SKVC and where this might lead to additional goal conflicts or raise the complexity regarding stakeholder expectations.
18. SKVC is advised to be careful to safeguard its independence when defining methodologies in consultations with the ministry and other relevant bodies.

ESG 3.5 Resources

19. SKVC might consider diversifying the income stream through introducing fees for certain assessment procedures in order to balance the dependency from the funding allocations by the ministry.
20. A balance between continuous support for the experienced staff members and empowerment of the newly employed staff is needed in order to ensure that the continuity and consistency of SKVC's expertise does not rely only on a handful of long-term staff members and that a gradual transfer of competencies to the entire staff takes place.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I: PROGRAMME OF THE SITE VISIT

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|--------------------------------|---------------|--|---|-------------------|
| 16.02.2022 – Day 0 (pre-visit) | | | | |
| | 60 min | Review panel's pre-visit meeting and preparations for day I | | |
| 22.02.2022 – Day I | | | | |
| | 08:30 - 09:25 | Review panel's private meeting | | |
| | 09:25 - 09:30 | <i>Connection set-up</i> | | |
| I | 09:30 - 10:30 | Meeting with the Senior Management Team and the staff providing administrative support | Director (member of SAR team) Deputy Director (Head of SAR team) Senior Advisor for Finance Human Resources Manager Adviser and Acting Head of Study Evaluation Division (member of SAR team) Public Relations Manager Head of Institutional Review Division (member of SAR team) | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|-------------|---------------|---|---|-------------------|
| | | | Head of General and Legal Affairs Division, Secretary to SKVC Council (member of SAR team) | |
| | 10:30 - 10:45 | Review panel's private discussion | | |
| | 10:45 - 10:50 | Connection set-up | | |
| 2 | 10:50 - 11:40 | Meeting with the Director and the Chair of the Council | Director Chair of the Council (Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs) | |
| | 11:40 - 11:45 | Review panel's private discussion | | |
| | 11:45 - 11:50 | Connection set-up | | |
| 3 | 11:50 - 12:50 | Meeting with the staff responsible for conducting assessment procedures (evaluation coordinators) <i>With particular interest in coordinators of:</i> - <i>Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania</i> - <i>Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania</i> <i>Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania</i> | Evaluation Coordinator, Study Evaluation Division (ex-ante study programme evaluation, ex-post study field evaluation, ex-post study programme evaluation abroad, Secretary to Study Evaluation Commission) Evaluation Coordinator, Institutional Review Division (coordination of drafting study field descriptors, institutional review) Evaluation Coordinator, Study Evaluation Division (ex-ante study programme evaluation, ex-post study field evaluation, | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|-------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| | | | <p>ex-post study programme evaluation abroad)</p> <p>Evaluation Coordinator, Study Evaluation Division (ex-ante study programme evaluation, ex-post study field evaluation, coordination of drafting study field descriptors, ex-post study programme evaluation abroad)</p> <p>Evaluation Coordinator (ex-ante study programme evaluation, ex-post study field evaluation, ex-post study programme evaluation abroad, Secretary to Appeals Commission)</p> <p>Evaluation Coordinator, Institutional Review Division (ex-post institutional review)</p> <p>Evaluation Coordinator, Institutional Review Division (ex-post institutional review, institutional review abroad, Secretary to Higher Education Institutions Evaluation Commission)</p> <p>Evaluation Coordinator, Study Evaluation Division (ex-ante study programme evaluation, ex-post study field evaluation)</p> | |
| | 12:50 - 13:40 | Lunch break | | |
| | 13:40 - 14:25 | Review panel's private discussion | | |
| | 14:25 - 14:30 | Connection set-up | | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|-------------|---------------|---|---|-------------------|
| 4 | 14:30 - 15:30 | Meeting with representatives of Commission of Higher Education Institutions' Review (AMVK), Study Evaluation Commission (SVK) and Appeal Commission | <p>Chair of AMVK (Head, Department of Botany and Genetics Institute of Biosciences, Life Sciences Center, Vilnius University, Senior Adviser to the Rector)</p> <p>Deputy Chair of AMVK (Vice-Rector for Research and Partnerships, Vilniaus kolegija; member of EURASHE Board)</p> <p>Member of AMVK (MA student of electronics and telecommunication technologies, Vilnius University)</p> <p>Member of AMVK, former member of SVK (JSV „Hnit-Baltic“, World Bank expert)</p> <p>Chair of SVK (Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, neurology)</p> <p>Member of SVK (Vice-Dean, Faculty of Arts, Vytautas Magnus University)</p> | |
| | 15:30 - 15:45 | Review panel's private discussion | | |
| | 15:45 - 15:50 | <i>Connection set-up</i> | | |
| 5 | 15:50 - 16:50 | Open slot for clarifications with the SKVC staff and/or representatives of advisory bodies | <p>Deputy Director</p> <p>Adviser and Acting Head of Study Evaluation Division</p> <p>Head of Institutional Review Division</p> | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|--------------------|--------------|---|---|-------------------|
| | 16:50 | Review panel's private discussion Wrap-up and preparation for Day 2 | | |
| 23.02.2022 – Day 2 | | | | |
| | 8:50 - 8:55 | Review panel's private meeting | | |
| | 8:55 - 9:00 | Connection set-up | | |
| 6 | 9:00 - 10:10 | <p>Meeting with representatives of some reviewed HEIs and HEIs that will be subject to newly developed assessment procedures.</p> <p><i>Discussion with the focus on the following procedures:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania</i> - <i>Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania</i> - <i>Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania</i> - <i>Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in Lithuania</i> | <p>Vice-rector for Studies, Klaipėda University;</p> <p>Deputy director, Lithuanian Maritime Academy;</p> <p>Vice-rector for Studies and Research, ISM University of Economics and Management;</p> <p>Vice-rector for Studies, Kaunas University of Technology;</p> <p>Acting Head of Study Programme and Quality Assurance Group at Study Office in the Centre of Academic Affairs , Mykolas Romeris University;</p> <p>Deputy Director for Academic Affairs, Panevėžys College</p> <p>Chief Specialist at Quality Management Department, Kaunas College</p> | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|-------------|---------------|---|--|-------------------|
| | | - <i>Ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile</i> | | |
| | 10:10 - 10:25 | Review panel's private discussion | | |
| | 10:25 - 10:30 | Connection set-up | | |
| 7 | 10:30 - 11:30 | <p>Meeting with representatives from the reviewers' pool</p> <p><i>Discussion with the focus on the following procedures:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania</i> - <i>Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania</i> - <i>Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania</i> | <p>Director of Sunrise Valley Science and Technology Park, SKVC expert in institutional review - social partner</p> <p>Student at Vilnius University, study programme Public administration and public policy analysis, member of Vilnius University Students' Representation, SKVC expert in institutional review - student representative,</p> <p>General Director of Astra LT, SKVC expert - social partner,</p> <p>Professor Emeritus, Department of Physics, University of Oxford, SKVC expert;</p> <p>Doctoral student at the Institute of Theoretical Physics and Astronomy, Vilnius University, SKVC expert-student representative;</p> <p>Head of the Department of Biomechanical Engineering, Faculty of Mechanics, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, SKVC expert;</p> | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|-------------|---------------|---|--|-------------------|
| | | | <p>Professor of Philosophy at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology</p> <p>Retired Associate Professor of the University of Warsaw, the Department of Macroeconomics and Foreign Trade</p> | |
| | 11:30 - 12:25 | Review panel's private discussion | | |
| | 12:25 - 12:30 | <i>Connection set-up</i> | | |
| 8 | 12:30 - 13:00 | Meeting with the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport | Vice-minister for Higher Education and Research, Ministry of Education, Science and Sports | |
| | 13:00 - 14:30 | <i>Lunch break</i> | | |
| | 14:30 - 14:55 | <i>Review panel's private discussion</i> | | |
| | 14:55 - 15:00 | <i>Connection set-up</i> | | |
| 9 | 15:00 - 16:00 | Meeting with SKVC stakeholders (students, employers, national organisations, institutions with whom SKVC collaborates in conducting assessments etc.) | <p>The Ombudsperson of the Academic Ethics and the Procedures of the Republic of Lithuania</p> <p>Head of the Study Division at the Ministry of the Higher Education, Science and Sports</p> <p>President of Lithuanian Student Association</p> <p>Deputy Director at Education Exchanges Support Foundation</p> | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|--------------------|---------------|---|--|-------------------|
| | | | <p>Director of the Department of Business Environment and Economy at Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists</p> <p>Vilnius University Students' Representation</p> | |
| | 16:00 - 16:15 | Review panel's private discussion | | |
| | 16:15 - 16:20 | <i>Connection set-up</i> | | |
| 10 | 16:20 - 17:20 | Meeting on focus areas selected by SKVC (ESG 2.2 and ESG 2.5) | <p>Chief Researcher, Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics, Vilnius University, SKVC expert,</p> <p>Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, neurology</p> <p>Director</p> <p>Deputy Director</p> <p>Adviser and Acting Head of Study Evaluation Division</p> <p>Head of Institutional Review Division</p> | |
| 24.02.2022 – Day 3 | | | | |
| | 09:00 - 09:55 | Meeting among panel members to agree on final issues to clarify | | |
| | 09:55 - 10:00 | <i>Connection set-up</i> | | |

| SESSION NO. | TIMING (CET) | TOPIC | PERSONS FOR INTERVIEW | LEAD PANEL MEMBER |
|-------------|---------------|---|---|-------------------|
| 11 | 10:00 - 10:30 | Meeting with the Appeal Commission | <p>Member of the Appeal Commission, in the role of a social partner delegated by Lithuanian Biotechnologists Association</p> <p>Vice-Chair of the Appeal Commission, delegated by Lithuanian Research Council</p> | |
| 12 | 10:30 - 11:00 | Meeting with Director to clarify any pending issues | Director | |
| | 11:00 - 12:00 | Private meeting between panel members to agree on the main findings | | |
| | 12:00 - 12:55 | Lunch break | | |
| | 12:55 - 13:00 | Connection set-up | | |
| 13 | 13:00 - 13:30 | Final de-briefing meeting with staff of the agency to inform about preliminary findings | <p>Director</p> <p>Deputy Director</p> <p>Adviser and Acting Head of Study Evaluation Division</p> <p>Head of Institutional Review Division</p> <p>Head of General and Legal Affairs Division, Secretary to SKVC Council</p> <p>Chair of the Council</p> <p>Evaluation Coordinators</p> | |

ANNEX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE REVIEW

Targeted review of Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) against the ESG

Annex I: TERMS OF REFERENCE

The present Terms of Reference were agreed between SKVC (applicant), ENQA (coordinator) and EQAR.

1. Background

Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education-SKVC has been registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 01/06/2012 and is applying for renewal of EQAR registration based on a targeted external review against *the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* coordinated by The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education-SKVC has been a member of the ENQA since 2012 and is applying for renewal of ENQA membership.

SKVC is carrying out the following activities within the scope of the ESG:

- *Ex-ante study programme external evaluation and accreditation in Lithuania (including joint programmes)*
- *Ex-ante institutional review in Lithuania*
- *Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania (*)*
- *Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania (*)*
- *Ex-post study programme evaluation abroad*
- *Ex-post institutional review abroad*
- *Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania (*)*
- *Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in Lithuania (*)*
- *Ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile (*)*

(*) These external QA activities have been considered by the Register Committee in its Change Report Decisions of 13/06/2020 and 29/09/2021 respectively⁴.

⁴See SKVC's Change Report Decision here: <https://www.eqar.eu/register/agencies/agency/?id=42>

All these activities will be included on the agency's profile on the EQAR website and linked to DEQAR database. NB: The agency may not upload reports from other activities to DEQAR.

The following activities of the applicant are outside the scope of the ESG:

- Recognition of foreign qualifications related to higher education.
- Annual monitoring of study fields.
- Other EU financed Projects.

These activities are not relevant to the application for renewal on EQAR.

2. Purpose and scope of the targeted review

This review will evaluate the extent to which SKVC continues to fulfil the requirements of the ESG. The targeted review aims to place more focus on those parts that require attention and provide sufficient information to support SKVC's application to EQAR.

The review will be further used as part of the agency's renewal of membership in ENQA.

2.1 Focus areas

- A) Standards with a partial compliance conclusion in the Register Committee's last renewal decision:

ESG 2.7 Complaints and appeals

ESG 3.5 Resources

- B) Standards 2.1 to 2.7 for the following (newly introduced) activities:

Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of study fields in Lithuania

Ex-post institutional review in Lithuania

*Ex-ante evaluation and accreditation of residency studies in Lithuania
(only simplified version conducted)*

*Ex-post evaluation and accreditation of the residency studies in
Lithuania (not conducted yet)*

*Ex-post institutional review of higher education in exile (not conducted
yet)*

- C) Standards affected by other types of substantive changes:

*ESG 3.3 Independence: considering to the changes of the national
regulation in the initiation of institutional review procedures and the
financing of SKVC's activities.*

- D) ESG 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance;

E) Selected enhancement area:

ESG 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose,
ESG 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

F) Other matters regarding ESG compliance that come up during the targeted review and that may affect the agency's compliance with the ESG (if any).

These issues should be investigated by the review panel as far as possible, providing an analysis and conclusion on the ESG standard(s) concerned.

3. The review process

The review will be conducted in line with the requirements of *the EQAR Procedures for Applications* and *the Policy on Targeted Reviews*, and following the methodology described in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following steps:

- Agreement on the Terms of Reference between EQAR, SKVC and ENQA;
- Nomination and appointment of the review panel by ENQA;
- Self-assessment by SKVC including the preparation and publication of a self-assessment report;
- A site visit by the review panel to SKVC;
- Preparation and completion of the final review report by the review panel;
- Scrutiny of the final review report by ENQA's Agency Review Committee;
- Analysis of the final review report and decision-making by the EQAR Register Committee;
- Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board.

3.1 Independence of the review coordinator

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) has not provided remunerated (e.g. consultancy) or unremunerated services to SKVC during the past 5 years, and conversely SKVC has not provided any remunerated or unremunerated services to ENQA.

3.2 Nomination and appointment of the review team members

The review panel consists of at least 3 members including an academic employed by a higher education institution, a student member and one other expert. At least one of the three members is from another country.

The third panel member should be a quality assurance professional that is currently employed by a QA agency and has been engaged in quality assurance within the past five years. When requested by the agency under review or when considered

particularly pertinent, a second quality assurance professional or other stakeholders (for example, a representative of the labour market) may be included in addition to the three panel members. In this case, an additional fee is charged to cover the reviewer's fee and travel expenses.

One of the members serves as the chair of the review panel, and one as the review secretary. At least one of the reviewers is an ENQA nominee (most often the QA professional[s]). At least one of the reviewers is appointed from the nominees of either the European University Association (EUA) or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the student member is always selected from among the ESU-nominated reviewers. If requested, the labour market representative may come from the Business Europe nominees or from ENQA. At least two panel members come from outside the national system of the agency under review (if relevant).

The panel will be supported by the ENQA Review Coordinator (an ENQA staff member) who will monitor the integrity of the process and ensure that ENQA's requirements are met throughout the process. The Review Coordinator will not be the secretary of the review and will not participate in the discussions during the site visit interviews.

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

ENQA will provide the agency with the proposed panel composition and the curricula vitarum of the panel members to establish that there are no known conflicts of interest. The reviewers will have to agree to a non-conflict of interest statement that is incorporated in their contract for the review of this agency.

Once appointed, ENQA will inform EQAR about the appointed panel members.

3.3 Self-assessment by SKVC, including the preparation of a self-assessment report

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

- Self-assessment includes all relevant internal and external stakeholders;

The self-assessment report is expected to contain:

- a description of the self-assessment process and the production of the SAR;
- a description of changes occurred within the agency since the last full review, including any eventual changes in the higher education system and quality assurance system in which the agency predominantly operates, the agency's structure, funding, its list of external quality assurance activities within the scope of the ESG, as well as the changes in the agency's quality assurance activities abroad (where relevant);

- a section that addresses the focus areas of the review, including standards that were considered to be partially compliant with the ESG in the last full review as well as ESG 2.1 and one self-selected ESG standard for enhancement (see 2.1 Focus areas);
- a SWOT analysis of the agency as a whole;
- for each of the individual standards enlisted above (see section 2) a consideration of how the agency has addressed the recommendations as noted in the previous EQAR Register Committee decision of inclusion/renewal (if applicable).

The report is well-structured, concise and comprehensively prepared. It clearly demonstrates the extent to which SKVC fulfils its tasks of external quality assurance and continues to meet the ESG and thus the requirements for EQAR registration.

The self-assessment report is submitted to the ENQA Secretariat, which has two weeks to carry out a screening. The purpose of a screening is to ensure that the self-assessment report is satisfactory for the consideration of the panel. The Secretariat will not judge the content of information itself but rather whether or not the necessary information, as outlined in the *Guidelines for ENQA Targeted Reviews*, is present. If the self-assessment report does not contain the necessary information and fails to respect the requested form and content, the ENQA Secretariat reserves the right to ask for a revised version within two weeks.

The final version of the agency's self-assessment report is then submitted to the review panel a minimum of eight weeks prior to the site visit. The agency publishes the completed SAR on its website and sends the link to ENQA. ENQA will publish this link on its website as well.

3.4 A site visit by the review panel

The review panel will draft a proposal of the site visit schedule considering the aspects included under the focus area (as defined under point 2.1 of the Terms of Reference).

The schedule will include an indicative timetable of the meetings and other exercises to be undertaken by the review panel during the site visit. The approved schedule shall be given to SKVC at least one month before the site visit, in order to properly organise the requested interviews.

The site visit should enable the review panel to explore how the agency has addressed the standards where it has been found to be partially compliant (if the case), aspects of substantive change, consideration of internal quality assurance (ESG 2.1) and the self-selected ESG standard(s) for enhancement. The panel will include extra time during the site-visit to address any other arising issues (if the case) that might have an impact on the agency's compliance with the ESG.

The site visit will close with a final de-briefing meeting outlining the panel's overall impressions but not its judgement on the ESG compliance of the agency.

Prior to the physical site visit, the panel attends a joint briefing call between the panel ENQA and EQAR to clarify the review expectations and address any possible arising matters.

In advance of the site visit (at least two weeks before the site visit), the panel will organise an obligatory online meeting with the agency. This meeting is held to ensure that the panel reaches a sufficient understanding of:

- The specific national/legal context in which the agency operates;
- The specific quality assurance system to which the agency belongs;
- The key characteristics of the agency's external QA activities.

3.5 Preparation and completion of the final review report

The review report will be drafted in consultation with all review panel members and correspond to the purpose and scope of the review as defined under articles 2 and 2.1. In particular, it will provide a clear rationale for its findings concerning each ESG. When preparing the report, the review panel should bear in mind the *EQAR Policy on the Use and Interpretation of the ESG* to ensure that the report will contain sufficient information for the Register Committee for application to EQAR⁵.

The external report will present the facts and analysis reflecting the reality at the time of review. This will form the main basis for the Register Committee's decision making.

A draft will first be submitted to the ENQA Review Coordinator who will check the report for consistency, clarity, and language. After panel has considered coordinator's feedback, the report will go to the agency for comment on factual accuracy. If SKVC chooses to provide a position statement in reference to the draft report, it will be submitted to the chair of the review panel within two weeks after the receipt of the draft report.

Thereafter, the review panel will take into account the statement by SKVC and submit the document for scrutiny to ENQA's Agency Review Committee and then to EQAR along with the remaining application documents (self-evaluation report, Declaration of Honour, statement to review report-if applicable). The report is to be finalised normally within 2-4 months of the site visit and will normally not exceed 30 pages in length. All panel will sign off on the final version of the external review report. ENQA will provide to SKVC the [Declaration of Honour](#) together with the final report.

⁵ See here: <https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/UseAndInterpretationOfTheESGv2.0-2015.pdf>

4. Publication and use of the report

SKVC will receive the expert panel's report and publish it on its website once the ENQA Agency Review Committee has validated the report. Prior to the final validation of the report, the ENQA Agency Review Committee may request additional (documentary) evidence or clarification from the review panel, review coordinator or the agency if needed. The review report will be published on ENQA website regardless of the review outcome. The report will also be published on the EQAR website together with the decision on registration, regardless of the outcome.

ENQA will retain ownership of the report. The intellectual property of all works created by the review panel in connection with the review contract, including specifically any written reports, will be vested in ENQA. In the case of an unsuccessful application to EQAR, the report may also be used by the ENQA Board to reach a conclusion on whether the agency can be admitted/reconfirmed as a member of ENQA.

5. Decision-making on EQAR registration and ENQA membership

The agency will submit the review report via email to EQAR before expiry of the agency's registration on EQAR. The agency will also include its self-assessment report (in a PDF format), the Declaration of Honour and any other relevant documents to the application to EQAR (i.e. annexes, statement to the review report).

EQAR is expected to consider the review report and the agency's application at its Register Committee meeting in autumn 2022. The Register Committee's final judgement on the agency's compliance with the ESG as a whole can either be substantially compliant (approval of the application) or not substantially compliant (rejection of the application). In case of a positive decision (substantially compliant with the ESG), the registration is renewed for a further five years (from the date of the review report).

The decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board will take place after EQAR Register Committee decision.

To apply for ENQA membership, the agency is requested to provide a letter addressed to the ENQA Board outlining its motivation for applying for membership and the ways in which the agency expects to contribute to the work and objectives of ENQA during its membership. This letter will be considered by the Board together with the confirmation of EQAR listing when deciding on the agency's membership. Should the agency not be granted the registration in EQAR or the registration is not renewed, the decision on ENQA membership will be taken based on the final review report, the application letter, and the statement from the Agency Review Committee. The decision on membership will be published on ENQA's website.

6. Indicative schedule of the review

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|--|------------------|
| Agreement on Terms of Reference | September 2021 |
| Appointment of review panel members | November 2021 |
| Self-assessment report (SAR) completed by SKVC | 31 December 2022 |
| Screening of SAR by ENQA Review Coordinator | December 2022 |
| Preparation of site visit schedule and indicative timetable | January 2022 |
| Briefing of review panel members | January 2022 |
| Review panel site visit | March 2022 |
| Submission of the draft review report to ENQA Review Coordinator | Mid-April 2022 |
| Factual check of the review report by the SKVC | End-April 2022 |
| Statement of SKVC to review panel (if applicable) | May 2022 |
| Submission of review report to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) | May 2022 |
| Validation of the review report by the Agency Review Committee | June 2022 |
| EQAR Register Committee meeting and decision on the application by SKVC | November 2022 |
| Decision on ENQA membership by the ENQA Board | December 2022 |

ANNEX 3. GLOSSARY

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|------|---|
| EHEA | European Higher Education Area |
| ENQA | European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education |
| EQAR | European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education |
| ESG | <i>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015</i> |
| HE | higher education |
| HEI | higher education institution |
| QA | quality assurance |
| SAR | self-assessment report |
| SKVC | Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (<i>Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras</i>) |

ANNEX 4. DOCUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE REVIEW

DOCUMENTS PROVIDED BY SKVC

Self-assessment report

Mapping of SKVC assessment methodologies against ESG (separately for institutional reviews and separately for reviews of study fields and study programmes)

Statement regarding the targeted review of SKVC

OTHER SOURCES USED BY THE REVIEW PANEL

SKVC website (www.skvc.lt)

2017 SKVC External Review Report

2017 SKVC Self-assessment Report

Substantive Change Report by SKVC and decision by EQAR from 24.04.2020

Substantive Change Report by SKVC and decision by EQAR from 29.09.2021

AIKOS website (<https://www.aikos.smm.lt/Puslapiai/Pradinis.aspx>)

ENQA TARGETED REVIEW 2022

THIS REPORT presents findings of the ENQA Targeted Review of the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC), undertaken in 2022.



European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education