

# Expert group joint opinion

Evaluation Procedure: Assessment of Study Field

Higher Education Institution: State Agency for Social Integration College

Study field: Translation

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# Summary of the Assessment of the Study Field and the Relevant Study Programmes

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The expert panel was assigned to assess the study field “Translation” and the relevant study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” under the field at the Social Integration State Agency (SISA) College. The panel analysed the Self Assessment Report (SAR) prepared by the College, participated in the on-site evaluation visit to the College, and prepared a joint opinion report. All experts participated in the visit on site in person.

In the joint opinion report, the expert panel assesses the compliance of the study field and the study programme with the relevant requirements and criteria for such programmes, highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each component, and suggests possible steps to be implemented to ensure sustainability and the improvement of the evaluated programme and the study field.

The study field “Translation” at the SISA College meets the needs and development trends of society and the national economy by preparing sign language interpreters crucial to the inclusion of deaf and hearing impaired individuals. This study field aligns with the strategic goals of the SISA College and supports Latvia’s language policy objectives, highlighting the importance of the Latvian Sign Language (LSL). This programme is particularly aligned with the Law on the State Language of Latvia, which mandates the development and use of the Latvian Sign Language for communication with the deaf community.

SISA College provides short-cycle professional study programmes, corresponding to Level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The “Sign Language Interpreter” programme is the only one of its kind in Latvia, highlighting its unique position in the education landscape. This exclusivity underscores the programme’s essential role in addressing the critical need for skilled interpreters, thus supporting the integration of individuals with hearing impairments into society and ensuring that students receive specialised training tailored to local needs. The welcoming atmosphere at SISA College, along with the open and trusting relationships between students, faculty, and administration, is highly praised. A student-centred approach was evident in every interaction, demonstrating a strong commitment to prioritising student needs. The strong motivation of the management staff to drive the programme’s success and the exceptional dedication of the teaching staff to provide quality education and support to students are also highlighted.

Students benefit from a robust support system, including career guidance, psychosocial services, and personalised attention from experienced faculty, which collectively foster a conducive learning environment.

Strong ties with industry practitioners and organisations such as the Latvian Association of the Deaf ensure the curriculum remains relevant and aligned with professional standards. Potential partnerships with international institutions, such as the Icelandic Communication Centre, offer opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration internationally.

The curriculum is regularly updated based on feedback from stakeholders and labour market demands, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness. Partially remote studies aim to accommodate working students and those with family commitments, potentially improving retention rates.

Overall, while the internal quality assurance system at SIVA is robust and effective in many areas, addressing the identified weaknesses could further enhance the quality and impact of the programme, ensuring that it meets the evolving needs of students and the labour market.

The programme faces significant dropout rates, particularly in the second year, suggesting a need for enhanced support and curriculum adjustments to better retain students.

The lack of participation of international guest lecturers limits the students’ exposure to global perspectives. Expanding international cooperation and participating in programmes like ERASMUS+ could enhance the quality of the programme and the student experience.

There is insufficient emphasis on research among faculty and students, restricting the contribution

of the programme to academic and professional knowledge. Encouraging research activities could enhance the reputation and impact of the programme.

Students enter the programme with varying levels of readiness, particularly in computer and foreign language skills, which can hinder progress and learning consistency.

The overlap of roles among individuals involved in programme creation, improvement, and inspection raises concerns about objectivity and the effectiveness of quality assurance processes. Ensuring diverse perspectives on governance could strengthen the development and evaluation of the programme.

Overall, the “Sign Language Interpreter” programme at SISA College is a vital educational offering that significantly contributes to the social inclusion of individuals with hearing impairments in Latvia. Although there are challenges to address, such as dropout rates and research engagement, the programme's strengths in industry connections, student support, and modern infrastructure provide a solid foundation for future growth and development. By addressing identified challenges and leveraging opportunities for enhancement, the programme can continue to fulfil its mission of preparing qualified sign language interpreters and contributing to societal inclusion and integration.

## **I - Assessment of the Study Field**

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#### **1.1 Management of the Study Field**

##### **Analysis**

1.1.1. The strategic priorities of the SISA College emphasise providing quality vocational education tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities. This aligns with the Latvian State Language Law, which mandates the development and use of Latvian Sign Language to facilitate communication with the deaf community. By offering the only programme for sign language interpreters in Latvia, the SISA College addresses a critical societal need and supports national efforts to promote inclusivity and accessibility.

The aim of the study field complies with the development needs of society and the national economy. The study field benefits society in a number of ways. As SAR (p. 12) defines, the purpose of the Translation study field is to train professional translators by providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competences to effectively perform translations in accordance with the professional standard and job market demand. This goal is implemented in the College study program “Sign Language interpreter”, which is the only study program in this study field.

The relevance of the study field and the study programme is further highlighted by its alignment with the Latvian National Development Plan for 2021–2027 and the Official Language Policy Guidelines for 2021–2027. These policies recognise the importance of developing Latvian sign language and training interpreters to improve the participation of hearing-impaired individuals in society. By preparing skilled interpreters, the programme contributes to the social and economic inclusion, addressing both societal and labour market demands.

SISA College has established clear strategic directions for 2021–2027 (Annex No. 1), focussing on inclusive education, governance improvement, and international collaboration. The “Sign Language Interpreter” programme and thus, study field “Translation” support these strategic objectives by offering a comprehensive curriculum that integrates practical skills with knowledge, aligning with the objective of providing competitive and student-centred vocational education. The inclusion of career development support further ensures that graduates are well prepared for employment, enhancing their competitiveness in the labour market. Since the demand for sign interpreters is growing in Latvia (on-site meeting with the main employer, the Latvian Association of the Deaf, 23.07.2024.) more and more sign interpreters will be needed.

Although the programme effectively prepares students for interpreting between Latvian Sign

Language and spoken Latvian, there is a need to put further emphasis on interpreting into English to achieve the programme outcomes. According to Learning Outcome No. 2 of the study programme (Annex No. 40), graduates should be able to translate between Latvian Sign Language and both Latvian and English spoken languages, ensuring accuracy, stylistic consistency and appropriate terminology use. However, observations during the on-site visit revealed that graduates often rely on separate interpreters for English, indicating a gap in this area. This reliance suggests that while the programme meets many criteria included in the Occupational Standard 2643 15 “Sign Language Interpreter”, it does not fully develop multilingual capabilities as described. Incorporating more practice in English interpretation would broaden students’ linguistic proficiency and increase their versatility in international settings, thus aligning more closely with the stated learning outcomes and professional standards.

The college’s commitment to improving infrastructure and integrating digital resources enhances the quality of the educational process. This is also beneficial for the study field and the programme as the management structure can support decision-making as well as manage continuous improvement.

Although there is room for growth in international engagement, the potential partnerships of the study field with institutions such as the Icelandic Communication Centre represent opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange, supporting strategic objectives related to internationalisation.

The uniqueness of the “Sign Language Interpreter” programme lies in its focus on serving individuals with disabilities, providing them with opportunities that accommodate their specific needs. The programme’s target audience includes individuals with a strong interest in supporting the deaf community, making it a vital educational offering that promotes inclusivity and empowerment.

The values of integration, competence, and diversity of the college are reflected in the programme’s approach to education. The programme offers a personalised, multiprofessional and integrated learning experience, ensuring that students receive the support and guidance needed to succeed both academically and professionally.

Although the programme currently stands alone in its specific focus, there is potential for greater interconnection with other study fields within the SISA College. Collaborative efforts with related programmes, such as those in social work or education, could enhance the learning experience by providing students with interdisciplinary perspectives and opportunities for broader skill development.

Collaboration with other higher education institutions in Latvia and abroad should be pursued to provide students with a broader perspective on the fields of translation and interpreting and to introduce them to theoretical approaches in linguistics.

The study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” at the SISA College is aligned with the mission, vision and strategic objectives of the institution, as well as national policy goals. The programme aims to equip individuals with disabilities and functional impairments with the skills and competences necessary for successful integration into the labour market, thus supporting the college’s broader mission of enhancing the employability and social inclusion of its students.

1.1.2. SISA College has conducted a comprehensive SWOT analysis for the study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” as part of its strategic planning process (SAR, p. 14). This analysis was informed by feedback from a diverse range of stakeholders, including students, faculty, graduates, employers, and industry experts. The SWOT analysis also took into account insights from previous accreditation reports and evaluations, ensuring a robust and informed understanding of the programme’s context and challenges.

Strengths:

The SWOT analysis highlights several strengths of the study programme “Sign Language

Interpreter”, which align with the observations of the experts made during the evaluation. Key strengths include:

1. The programme is the only one in Latvia that provides specialised training for sign language interpreters, addressing a critical need for qualified professionals to support the deaf community.
2. Collaboration with organisations such as the Latvian Association of the Deaf ensures that the programme remains relevant and aligned with current professional standards.

However, it should be noted that having only one major employer, which is also a significant stakeholder in the industry, may pose threats such as potential conflicts of interest and limited diversity in perspectives. The participation of this stakeholder in the College’s Advisory Council and other institutions could result in undue influence on the direction and priorities of the programme. Such dependence on a single entity could limit the programme’s adaptability and innovation, potentially hindering its ability to respond effectively to broader industry changes and evolving educational needs.

3. The programme offers extensive support to students, including career guidance and psychosocial services, fostering a conducive learning environment.

These strengths reflect the alignment of the programme with the mission of SISA College to improve the employability and social inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

#### Weaknesses:

The SWOT analysis identifies several weaknesses, corroborated by the evaluation findings:

1. A significant challenge for the programme is the high dropout rate, particularly in the second year, indicating the need for enhanced student support and curriculum adjustments, as well as focussing on attracting more students.
2. There is a lack of emphasis on research among faculty and students, which restricts the contribution of the programme to academic and professional knowledge.
3. Students enter the programme with varying levels of preparedness, particularly in computer and English language skills, which can hinder progress.

#### Opportunities:

The SWOT analysis identifies key opportunities for the development of the programme, including

1. Potential partnerships with institutions such as the Icelandic Communication Centre represent opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration, enhancing the programme's international profile.
2. Incorporating more English interpretation practice and expanding interdisciplinary collaboration can broaden students' linguistic proficiency and skill sets.
3. Using modern technologies, such as AI-based language technologies, digital learning platforms, and remote study options, can improve the accessibility of the programme and appeal to a broader audience.

#### Threats:

The SWOT analysis also highlights potential threats that could impact the programme:

1. A decrease in student numbers could affect programme sustainability, highlighting the need for effective recruitment and retention strategies.
2. Heavy reliance on the Latvian Association of the Deaf for student internships and employment poses a risk if circumstances change.

SISA College has integrated the findings of its SWOT analysis into its development planning documents. The strategic plan for 2021–2027 outlines clear objectives and initiatives aimed at addressing identified weaknesses and leveraging opportunities. These include enhancing international collaboration, expanding the curriculum, and improving student support systems to

reduce dropout rates.

The college's development plan reflects a strong connection with stakeholders, incorporating feedback and insights from industry partners, faculty, and students. This collaborative approach ensures that the programme remains responsive to evolving needs and continues to align with national and institutional priorities.

The strategic integration of these insights into development planning demonstrates the commitment of the college to continuous improvement and its commitment to meeting the needs of students and the broader community.

1.1.3. The management structure of the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter" at the SISA College is well defined and supports the effective administration and development of the study field. The programme is managed by a dedicated programme manager who coordinates with the Head of College, and other relevant personnel to ensure smooth operations and continuous improvement. The roles and responsibilities of each position are clearly delineated, facilitating a logical division of labour and efficient decision-making processes.

The governance framework includes several key bodies, such as the College Council and the Research and Methodological Council. These entities provide strategic oversight and facilitate collaboration among academic staff, administrative personnel, and industry stakeholders. The participation of representatives from various departments and student self-government ensures that diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making.

The management of the study field is strongly orientated towards the development and enhancement of the programme. This is evident in the ongoing updates to the programme's curriculum, which are informed by feedback from students, graduates, and industry experts. The college's commitment to aligning the programme with labour market demands and societal needs reflects a proactive approach to development.

To further improve the quality of the study process, the SISA College has established mechanisms for regular review and enhancement. This includes incorporating input from the College's Advisory Council, where key stakeholders, including major employers, provide recommendations on curriculum content, teaching staff, and programme priorities. The strategic involvement of stakeholders ensures that the programme remains relevant and aligned with industry trends.

The decision-making process within the programme is characterised by efficiency and openness. The collaborative nature of the management structure fosters an environment in which ideas can be freely exchanged and considered. Regular meetings and consultations with faculty, students, and stakeholders ensure that decisions are well informed and reflect the goals of the programme.

During the on-site visit, the management staff demonstrated a high level of motivation and dedication to the success of the programme. Their forward thinking approach contributes to the ongoing development of the programme. The management team actively explores opportunities for international collaboration and curriculum enhancement, indicating a strong commitment to maintaining the competitive edge of the programme.

The support provided by administrative and technical personnel is integral to meeting the needs of the programme and ensuring its effective delivery. Centralised support functions within the Agency, such as IT, HR, and financial services, enable the programme to operate efficiently and focus on educational excellence. The IT department plays a crucial role in maintaining the digital infrastructure necessary for modern teaching and learning experiences, such as the Moodle platform.

Administrative staff, including office administrators and career support experts, provide essential services that enhance the student experience. This support extends to personalised guidance and assistance, contributing to the overall success of students in the programme.

By fostering an environment of openness and strategic planning, the college positions the

programme for continued growth and success. The dedication of the management and teaching staff further underscores the programme's commitment to providing quality education and support to students.

1.1.4. The admission system for the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter" at SISA College is well structured and clearly outlined in the Self-Assessment Report (SAR, p. 17-18). The admissions process is governed by the "Admission Rules for Studies at the Social Integration State Agency College" (Annex No. 13), which are updated annually to reflect any changes in legislation or programme requirements. These rules are approved by the College Admissions Committee and align with the regulatory standards set by the relevant authorities.

Admission requirements are designed to ensure that candidates meet the necessary educational prerequisites and are capable of succeeding in the programme. The criteria are determined based on the regulatory requirements and the specific needs of the study programme, taking into account feedback from employers and statistical data on student performance. This ensures that the admissions process is both rigorous and relevant to the demands of the field.

SISA College has established comprehensive procedures for recognising prior learning, professional experience, and achievements from both formal and non-formal education. The SAR highlights these procedures, which are crucial for allowing students to receive credit for relevant previous education and experience. This recognition process supports the academic progression of students and reduces redundancy in their studies. These procedures are supported by internal regulations that outline the criteria and methods for assessing prior learning, ensuring that all recognition is conducted fairly and consistently. Students can start their studies at later stages by transferring from another educational institution, resuming their studies after a break, or continuing their studies after obtaining another qualification. The College Research and Methodological Council (after receiving the application and the attached documents, approves the comparison of the previously studied subjects and their scope with the relevant part of the College study programme and indicates in which study courses from the previously studied courses credit points can be equated and in which additional examinations must be taken. (SAR, p. 18)

While admission and recognition systems are well developed, it is essential that all stakeholders, including students, faculty, and employers, are adequately informed about these processes. The SAR indicates that there is a direct connection between employers and the college, with employers often consulted on admission criteria and programme relevance. However, to what extent are all stakeholders aware of the specific procedures for the recognition of previous learning and experience remains an area for potential improvement.

During the site visit, discussions with employers confirmed their involvement and awareness of the requirements and objectives of the programme, highlighting the strong industry involvement. Ensuring that all stakeholders have a comprehensive understanding of admission and recognition processes can further enhance transparency and stakeholder confidence.

By maintaining and improving admission procedures, SISA College supports the academic and professional success of its students, contributing to the overall effectiveness and impact of the programme.

1.1.5. SISA College has developed a comprehensive and systematic approach to assessing student achievements and learning outcomes within the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter". The assessment process is governed by the college's internal regulations, specifically the "Procedure for testing and evaluation of knowledge of the students of the Social Integration State Agency College" (Annex 14), which outlines the methods and criteria used to evaluate student performance (SAR, p. 18-19).

The assessment system is designed to ensure that students meet the learning outcomes defined by the programme and align with the standards required by professional bodies. Assessments are structured to evaluate both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, essential for producing competent sign language interpreters.

The primary methods of assessment used in the programme include:

1. Written and Oral Examinations. These are used to evaluate students' understanding of theoretical concepts and their ability to articulate this knowledge effectively.
2. Practical Assessments. Students are assessed through practical tasks, including real-time sign language interpretation, which are critical to gauging their proficiency and readiness for professional practice.
3. Coursework and Projects. Independent research projects, presentations, and group work are integral to the assessment process, encouraging students to apply their knowledge creatively and collaboratively.
4. Mid-term and Final Evaluations. These assessments provide checkpoints for measuring student progress throughout the course and ensure that learning objectives are met.
5. Defence of Qualification Theses. The programme culminates in the development and defence of a qualification thesis, which includes a practical interpretation component and a research paper. This comprehensive assessment ensures that students can demonstrate both academic rigour and practical competency.

The assessment methods are aligned with the programme's learning outcomes, including the ability to interpret between the Latvian Sign Language and the spoken languages, as stated in the learning outcomes (Annex No. 41).

The programme's assessment system is designed with a strong emphasis on student-centred learning. Throughout the site visit, it was evident that both current students and graduates spoke positively about their experiences and the supportive environment fostered by the faculty. This environment encourages active participation, with students regularly participating in discussions, presentations, and peer evaluations.

Students have the opportunity to provide feedback on courses and teaching methods through an online survey, allowing them to express their needs and suggestions for improvement. This feedback mechanism is instrumental in ensuring that the programme remains responsive to student needs and fosters a culture of continuous improvement. Students also have other avenues to submit feedback and complaints, including via E-klase, email, or using a post box for anonymous submissions.

Assessment procedures are relevant and effective for achieving the objectives of the programme and meeting student needs. They are designed to ensure that students acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed as professional interpreters. The comprehensive nature of the assessments, which include both theoretical and practical components, ensures that graduates are well prepared for the demands of the labour market.

The inclusion of formative assessments throughout the programme provides ongoing feedback, allowing students to identify areas for improvement and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. This approach not only enhances learning outcomes, but also supports the development of independent, self-directed learners.

By continually refining these procedures and incorporating student feedback, the SISA College ensures that the programme remains relevant, rigorous, and responsive to the needs of its students and the broader community.

1.1.6. SISA College has established comprehensive principles of academic integrity to ensure that all academic activities within the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter" uphold the highest ethical standards. The college has implemented a "Rules on Academic Integrity at the Social



Integration State Agency College” (Annex No. 24), which outlines the fundamental ethical responsibilities expected of students, faculty, and staff. These principles are introduced to students during their introductory lectures and reinforced throughout their academic journey.

Upon enrolment, students are required to sign a study agreement that explicitly commits them to complete their studies independently, prohibits plagiarism, and emphasises the importance of acknowledging others’ ideas and work. This agreement serves as a formal acknowledgement of their understanding and acceptance of the college’s academic integrity standards.

SISA College has adopted effective anti-plagiarism tools to maintain academic integrity and foster a culture of honesty and responsibility. The college is a member of the University of Latvia’s Unified Computerised Plagiarism Control System, which allows for thorough checks of students’ qualification papers and other academic work. This system provides a robust mechanism to detect plagiarism instances and to ensure the originality of student submissions. (SAR, p. 20)

In the event that plagiarism is detected, SISA College has established clear procedures to address such violations. The process is governed by internal regulations that specify the steps to be taken when signs of plagiarism are identified. An evaluation is conducted in accordance with these procedures, and the College Ethics Commission is responsible for making a final determination on the matter. This structured approach ensures that any breaches of academic integrity are handled fairly and consistently.

The commitment to academic integrity is integral to the internal culture of SISA College. By promoting ethical behaviour and a strong sense of responsibility, the college creates an environment that encourages students to engage in genuine academic inquiry and original research. This culture of integrity extends beyond the classroom and prepares students for professional roles where ethical conduct is paramount.

The college’s efforts to cultivate a culture of integrity are supported by regular communication and engagement with all stakeholders. While the college has made significant strides in implementing systems to prevent plagiarism, ongoing efforts to ensure that all stakeholders, including students, faculty and industry partners, are informed about these systems are essential to maintain transparency and trust.

These efforts contribute significantly to the development of ethical professionals who are well-prepared to navigate the challenges of the interpreting field.

When reviewing the “Rules on Academic Integrity at the College of the Social Integration State Agency” (Annex No. 24), several opportunities for enhancement have been identified to ensure that the rules reflect modern trends and effectively address the evolving needs of the academic community. The following is suggested to strengthen the integrity framework and foster a culture of ethical conduct:

1. Update the Language to Reflect Inclusivity and Clarity. Revise the language throughout the document to ensure clarity and inclusivity, avoiding legal jargon where possible, and using straightforward language to make the rules more accessible to all readers.
2. Incorporate Digital and AI-Related Integrity Issues. Include provisions addressing the use of artificial intelligence and digital tools, such as using AI-generated content without proper acknowledgement. As AI tools become more prevalent, it is essential to address their use and potential misuse in academic settings.
3. Strengthen the Focus on Ethical Use of Technology. Add a section on ethical use of technology in academic work, including guidelines for using online resources, digital collaboration tools, and social media responsibly.
4. Introduce Restorative Justice Practices. Consider incorporating restorative justice approaches to address academic misconduct. This involves creating opportunities for offenders to understand the impact of their actions and engage in community-building and educational activities as part of the resolution process.
5. Enhance Stakeholder Communication and Training. Implement regular workshops and training

sessions for students and staff to raise awareness about academic integrity principles, the consequences of violations, and the use of anti-plagiarism tools.

6. Emphasise Ongoing Education. Include a clause that requires continuous education on academic integrity for both students and staff. This could involve periodic refresher courses or seminars to keep everyone informed about best practices and emerging trends.

7. Provide Clear Examples and Case Studies. Incorporate examples and case studies of academic misconduct scenarios to illustrate the rules more effectively. This can help students and staff understand what constitutes a violation and how to avoid it.

8. Clarify Procedures for Reporting and Resolving Misconduct. Streamline and clarify the procedures for reporting and resolving cases of academic misconduct. Ensure that all parties understand the process, including how investigations are conducted and how decisions are made.

9. Promote a Positive Culture of Integrity. Focus on creating a positive culture of integrity by celebrating examples of ethical behaviour and academic excellence. Recognising and rewarding integrity can help reinforce these values in the college community.

10. Utilise Technology for Plagiarism Detection and Prevention. Continue leveraging advanced plagiarism detection tools and encourage their use as educational aids to help students understand how to cite sources correctly and develop original work.

11. Address Remote Learning Challenges. Include guidelines specific to remote or online learning environments that address issues such as integrity of online exams, group work dynamics in virtual settings, and digital collaboration norms.

## **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

### **Conclusions:**

The study field under assessment aims to train professional translators by providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competences to effectively perform translations in accordance with the professional standard and job market demand. The SISA College aligns with the needs of the labour market addressing the crucial demand for skilled sign language interpreters in Latvia, thus playing a vital role in supporting individuals with hearing impairments and promoting their integration into society.

By addressing the identified weaknesses, such as dropout rates and international engagement, the college can further enhance the quality and impact of the programme. The dedication and motivation of the management and teaching staff play a crucial role in driving the programme's success, fostering a positive and supportive learning environment.

### **Strengths:**

1. As the only programme for sign language interpreters in Latvia, the programme provides specialised training that meets a critical societal need and aligns with national language policies.

2. The programme is closely aligned with the strategic objectives of the college, focussing on inclusive education and improving the employability of individuals with disabilities.

3. Students benefit from robust support systems, including personalised guidance from experienced faculty, access to modern technology, and career development services.

4. The programme maintains strong connections with industry stakeholders, such as the Latvian Association of the Deaf, ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and aligned with professional standards.

5. The college has established comprehensive principles of academic integrity, supported by effective anti-plagiarism tools and clear procedures for addressing violations.

**Weaknesses:**

1. The programme faces significant dropout rates, particularly in the second year, indicating a need for enhanced student support and curriculum adjustments.
2. There is a lack of involvement from international guest lecturers and limited opportunities for student and staff mobility, which could enhance the programme's global relevance.
3. Students enter the programme with varying levels of preparedness, particularly in computer and English language skills, which can present challenges in providing a consistent educational experience.
4. There is limited emphasis on research among faculty and students, restricting the contribution of the programme to academic knowledge and innovation.
5. Reliance on a single major stakeholder could limit the diversity of perspectives in programme development and evaluation.

## **1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System**

### **Analysis**

1.2.1. The SISA College has developed a robust internal quality assurance system designed to uphold high standards of education and continuous improvement in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (SAR, p. 21). This system is crucial to maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the study field and its relevant programme, such as the "Sign Language Interpreter" programme, which is unique in Latvia. The management of the programme is enthusiastic and dedicated to the work, as was clearly confirmed during the on-site meeting with the SISA management, with the person responsible for the quality assurance system (23.07.2024).

The College's quality management system is based on the ISO 9001: 2015 Quality Management System Standard, which sets the framework for continuous development through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (SAR, Chapters 1.3 & 1.4). The QMS manual, which guides the implementation and monitoring of quality processes, is accessible on the Agency's internal website, although it is not publicly available. This manual details the process implementation and monitoring schemes, identifies responsible staff members (process owners and managers), and outlines the procedures for regular audits and nonconformity reporting.

SISA College is committed to continuous improvement of its study programmes, ensuring that they remain relevant to the labour market and meet the needs of students and society. This commitment is evidenced by the regular surveys conducted among staff, students, and employers to gather feedback on programme quality and the effectiveness of teaching methods (SAR, p. 22). Additionally, the management performs annual internal inspections of study programmes, ensuring adherence to high-quality standards. Regular lecture monitoring is done by the manager of the programme and sometimes also other faculty members, and feedback is discussed with the respective faculty member. The results of the lecture monitoring are documented in the lecture monitoring protocols.

The college involves a wide range of stakeholders in the review and updating process of study programmes, including the Head of the College, the Deputy Head, programme managers, teaching staff, the Research and Methodological Council, the College Council, employers, and industry professionals (SAR, p. 22). This collaborative approach ensures that the programme is continuously refined to meet evolving standards and expectations.

Although the quality assurance system is well-structured, the evaluation highlighted concerns about the concentration of responsibilities among a limited number of individuals involved in programme

development and assessment. The Research and Methodological Council, for instance, includes members who also participate in the College Council and the Advisory Council of the Social Integration State Agency, potentially leading to a lack of diverse perspectives (Annex No. 3). Some of these members are also involved in the preparation of the professional standard 2643 15 “Sign Language Interpreter” and represent the main employer of the graduates of the study programme.

To address this, it is recommended to integrate more independent external reviewers into the quality assurance process. This could include inviting external academic linguists, researchers, Sign language interpreters, and foreign sign language specialists to provide fresh insights and enhance the evaluation of the programme. Expanding these collaborations can strengthen the governance, development, and academic rigour of the programme.

Although the college claims to monitor international quality requirements and innovations (SAR, p. 21), the site visit revealed that connections with European and global institutions are limited. Strengthening these bonds is essential to ensure that the programme remains at the forefront of educational advancements and meets international standards.

The study field and the relevant programme align with the strategic development objectives of SISA College, supporting the college’s mission to improve vocational rehabilitation and social integration. The interconnection of the study programme within the field is logical and consistent with the goals of the college. However, further integration of core linguistic studies is advised to bolster the foundation of any translation and interpretation education, ensuring comprehensive coverage of essential skills.

The internal quality assurance system at the SISA College is well established and effectively supports the continuous improvement of its study programmes. By incorporating diverse perspectives and improving international collaborations, the college can further strengthen its quality assurance processes and maintain its leadership in sign language education in Latvia. The commitment and enthusiasm of the programme management and teaching staff are evident and critical to the programme's ongoing success.

1.2.2. The SISA College has established comprehensive procedures for the development and review of its study programmes, ensuring that they remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of the labour market and society. While no new study programmes have been created within the College’s study field recently, existing processes are designed to support potential future developments in response to labour market demands (SAR, p. 23). Sign language translation is a very new study in Latvia, and it would be very difficult to add new programmes to this field at this stage.

The college has implemented internal regulations titled “Procedure for Updating Study Programmes and Developing New Study Programmes” (Annex No. 12), which clearly outline the steps and criteria to introduce new study programmes. These procedures are based on labour market research and are developed in close collaboration with policymakers in the Ministry of Welfare to ensure alignment with national priorities and economic needs (SAR, p. 23).

Feedback mechanisms for the existing study field, including input from students, employers, and graduates, are well-defined, efficient, and accessible to all stakeholders. These mechanisms facilitate the continuous review and improvement of study programmes, ensuring that they remain aligned with industry standards and stakeholder expectations (SAR, p. 23) and these procedures can be assessed as effective. Such feedback mechanisms and connections were confirmed during the on-site visit at the meetings with employers, students, and graduates (24.07.2024).

Students are actively encouraged to provide feedback on their educational experience through surveys conducted after the completion of each study course. These surveys are available in the College’s Moodle environment, allowing students to evaluate various aspects such as acquired knowledge, teaching methods, resources, and course relevance. Feedback from these surveys is

compiled and analysed to assess course quality, and the results are used to inform programme improvements (Annex No. 27).

Additionally, students can submit suggestions or complaints through multiple channels, including E-klase, email, or anonymously via a suggestion box. This flexibility in communication ensures that students can easily express their concerns and contribute to the improvement of the study programme.

The College conducts annual surveys of employers and graduates to gather information on the effectiveness of the study programme, the quality of education, and the relevance of students' skills in the labour market. This feedback is critical to identify areas for improvement and to ensure that the programme continues to produce competent professionals who meet industry needs (Annex No. 25 and 26).

Key stakeholders, including policymakers, employers, students, and graduates, are actively involved in the review and update process of the study programme. This collaborative approach was confirmed during the on-site visit and meetings with various stakeholders, who expressed satisfaction with the existing feedback mechanisms and the college's responsiveness to their input (24.07.2024).

The procedures for programme development and review at SISA College are logical and efficient, with a clear emphasis on transparency and stakeholder participation. The Vocational Rehabilitation Support Committee plays a pivotal role in overseeing the quality of the study programme, analysing performance indicators, and addressing student needs. The use of systems like the Vocational Rehabilitation Information System (PRIS) and the E-klase (Moodle) platform further supports the collection and analysis of relevant data to inform decision-making and programme enhancements.

The college's commitment to continuous improvement is evident through its regular updates to study programmes, informed by feedback from stakeholder and market research. Although financial constraints may limit some development possibilities, the college's proactive approach and established processes ensure that the study programme remains relevant and effective in achieving the objectives.

1.2.3. The SISA College has established an effective and transparent mechanism for the submission of student complaints and suggestions. This system is designed to promote continuous improvement in study programmes and create a supportive environment for students to express their concerns and ideas.

Students are informed of their rights to submit suggestions and complaints, both oral and written, to key figures such as the Head of the College, the Deputy Director for Vocational Rehabilitation of the Agency, or the Agency Director. The submission process is guided by the Law "Procedure for Consideration of Applications, Complaints and Suggestions in State and Local Government Institutions" and the internal regulations of the Agency, specifically the "Regulations on Academic Integrity at the Social Integration State Agency College" (Annex No. 24) (SAR, p. 24).

The College offers multiple channels for students to communicate their concerns, ensuring accessibility and convenience. These channels include:

1. Student Council: This body collects suggestions and complaints from students and submits proposals to the College management, ensuring that student voices are heard and addressed systematically.
2. Direct Communication: Students can communicate their concerns directly through telephone, electronic mail, or face-to-face meetings with faculty, professionals, and the administration. This direct access fosters a proactive approach to prevention and resolution of conflicts.
3. Anonymous Submissions: Students have the option to submit complaints anonymously through a suggestion box, providing an additional layer of comfort for those who may wish to express concerns without revealing their identity.

Students are encouraged to express their opinions and are assured of receiving feedback on their submissions within a reasonable time frame. Typically, responses are provided within 14 days, and efforts are made to reach mutually agreeable solutions to any issues raised. This feedback loop is crucial to maintaining transparency and trust between students and the administration.

The supportive and open environment at SISA College was confirmed during the on-site visit and meetings with students and graduates (24.07.2024). Students expressed satisfaction with the communication processes and noted that the study environment fosters open dialogue and collaboration between students and faculty.

In addition to the complaint and suggestion mechanisms, the Agency has established an Ethics Committee. This committee aims to uphold professional ethical standards and supports the activities of the Agency's officials and employees in accordance with the Agency's Code of Ethics (SAR, p. 22). The College periodically organises general student meetings to examine and discuss issues in order to reach common solutions.

Such a system not only facilitates the resolution of potential conflicts but also encourages a culture of mutual respect and collaboration.

1.2.4. The SISA College has established a comprehensive statistical data collection mechanism to support the continuous improvement of its study programme. This mechanism ensures regular collection and analysis of information, focussing on student achievements, programme effectiveness, and alignment with labour market needs.

The College utilises the Vocational Rehabilitation Information System (PRIS) to aggregate and manage essential statistical data. PRIS collects information on students, including personal data, eligibility assessments, study progress, and input from various specialists involved in vocational rehabilitation services. These data are categorised by study group, age, disability, and residence, allowing for detailed analysis and reporting (SAR, p. 25).

PRIS provides the possibility to produce statistical reports to analyse the data. In compliance with external regulations, all necessary information is also managed in the National Education Information System (VIIS), ensuring a standardised approach to data management across educational institutions in Latvia.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Support Committee meets monthly to analyse performance indicators, student flow, and enrolment numbers. This regular review process helps identify trends, challenges, and opportunities for improvement in the study programme (SAR, p. 25).

SISA College has implemented a robust survey system to collect feedback from students, graduates, and employers. This feedback is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of the programme and identifying areas for improvement. The surveys include:

1. Student Surveys (Annex No. 27): Conducted in the Moodle environment, these surveys assess students' perceptions of the acquired knowledge, teaching methods, resources, feedback, and course connections. Student responses are anonymous, ensuring candid feedback. Students can save partially completed surveys and cannot edit them once submitted.
2. Graduate Surveys (Annex No. 26): These surveys evaluate graduates' perceptions of programme quality, alignment with labour market requirements, relevance to job duties, and opportunities for further education. Graduates are also asked if they would recommend the programme and if it aligns with current industry trends.
3. Employer Surveys (Annex No. 25): Employers provide feedback on interns' attitudes, professional preparation, and work abilities. They also offer recommendations to improve theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and the content of the programme. Employers are asked about their willingness to continue collaboration with SISA and participate in content development.

The survey data for the academic year are analysed (Annex No. 28).

The results of a recent survey indicate a high level of satisfaction among graduates and employers with the quality of the programme and its relevance to the labour market. Graduates generally rate

the quality of the programme as high, acknowledging the importance of education in finding employment. Employers report that graduates demonstrate the comprehensive understanding and practical skills necessary for their professions.

Although the surveys are conducted continuously, the fact that the number of respondents has been very limited through the years should be taken into account and reasonably implemented as the very low number of respondents might be very risky and non objective.

1.2.5. The College's study programmes, including the "Sign Language Interpreter", are featured on the Agency's main website [www.siva.gov.lv](http://www.siva.gov.lv), which serves as the primary source of information for prospective students and other stakeholders. The College's specific section on the Agency's website <http://www.siva.gov.lv/koledza.html> provides key details such as the programme code, the qualification to be obtained, prerequisites, the language of instruction, the format, duration, certification, funding, and the course list. This information aligns with the official data available in the National Education Information System (VIIS) and the e-platform <http://koledza.siva.gov.lv/moodle/> (Latvian only), ensuring consistency and reliability.

The Head of the College and the Public Relations Officer are responsible for the information in the College's section of the website, while the Agency's Information Technology Department is responsible for the technical solutions (SAR, p.26).

The information published on the Agency website is regularly updated and consistent with the official registers, to ensure that prospective students receive accurate and relevant data. The website is accessible in both Latvian and English, making it easier for a broader audience to access important information about the College and its programmes. The website offers essential details about the study programmes, which help prospective students make informed decisions about their education. However, the lack of an independent website for the College may limit its visibility and branding as a distinct educational institution within the Agency. Although the website provides information in English, the depth and comprehensiveness of this information might not match the Latvian version, potentially limiting its accessibility to non-Latvian speakers. The current website layout may not fully meet modern design trends, which prioritise user engagement, ease of navigation, and interactive content.

Expert panel suggests:

1. Develop an Independent College Website. Establishing a dedicated website for the College could enhance its visibility, allowing it to establish a unique identity and better promote its programmes. This site should maintain a strong link with the main Agency website to ensure coherence and brand consistency.
2. Enhance English Content. Increase the depth and detail of the English content to match that of the Latvian version, thereby improving accessibility for international audiences and potential students.
3. Implement Modern Web Design Practices. Update the website to incorporate modern design elements such as responsive layouts, interactive content, multimedia elements, and intuitive navigation to improve user engagement and satisfaction.
4. Include More Interactive Features. Incorporate features such as virtual tours, student testimonials, and interactive course planners to engage potential students more effectively and provide a comprehensive overview of the College's offerings.
5. Regular Feedback Mechanisms. Establish a feedback system on the website to collect visitor input on their user experience and information needs, which can guide ongoing improvements and updates to the website content.
6. Leverage Social Media and Digital Platforms. Improve the college's online presence by integrating with social media platforms to share updates, news, and engage with prospective students and the

community.

During the on-site meeting the student mentioned that they found the information about sign language interpreting on the Instagram account of one of the Latvian interpreters and graduate of SISA (24.07.2024.) A separate and active Instagram and/or Facebook account for the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter" would increase the awareness and attract more interest from the general public.

By implementing these suggestions, the College can improve its online presence, better inform and attract prospective students, and strengthen its identity as a leading institution in the education of sign language interpreters.

## **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

### **Conclusions:**

The internal quality assurance system at the SISA College is developed. It aligns with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management System Standard. The procedures and indicators for developing and reviewing the study programme are clear, ensuring continuous improvement and alignment with the needs of the labour market. The College maintains strong relationships with stakeholders, including employers and students, to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the programme. However, there are areas for improvement, particularly in the inclusion of linguists in the quality assurance process and the participation of external participants in evaluations.

### **Strengths:**

1. The College has established effective feedback mechanisms for students, graduates, and employers, facilitating ongoing programme enhancement.
2. The mechanism for submitting student complaints and suggestions promotes student engagement.

### **Weaknesses:**

1. The assessment process lacks the involvement of linguists, which is crucial for a programme that intersects with linguistic fields such as sign language and translation studies.
2. The same individuals are involved in evaluating their own programme, which may introduce bias and limit the objectivity of assessments.
3. There is a lack of external participants in the quality assessment process, which could provide fresh perspectives and enhance the credibility of evaluations.
4. The College lacks an independent website that could enhance its visibility and branding as a distinct educational institution within the Agency.
5. Limited financial and human resources may restrict the potential for programme development and expansion.

## **Assessment of the requirement [1]**

- 1 R1 - Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 2.1 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system:

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

The quality management system is designed to promote ongoing improvement and effective performance of the study field, but a major concern is the lack of objectivity due to the small



number of individuals involved in the process of evaluation. Additionally, while staff qualifications are verified internally, there is a shortage of academic staff with linguistic background.

- 2 1.1 - The higher education institution/ college has established a policy and procedures for assuring the quality of higher education.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The policy and procedures for maintaining the quality of higher education are well-defined and functioning.

- 3 1.2 - A mechanism for the development and internal approval of the study programmes of the higher education institution/ college, as well as the supervision of their performance and periodic inspection thereof has been developed.

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

Mechanisms for developing the study programme, monitoring performance, and conducting periodic reviews have been established. However, a significant issue is that the same individuals are responsible for evaluating their own programme, which may introduce bias and limit the objectivity of the assessments.

- 4 1.3 - The criteria, conditions, and procedures for the evaluation of students' results, which enable reassurance of the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, have been developed and published.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The criteria, conditions, and procedures for evaluating student performance clearly align with the intended learning outcomes.

- 5 1.4 - Internal procedures and mechanisms for assuring the qualifications of the academic staff and the work quality have been developed.

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

Internal procedures and mechanisms for verifying the qualifications of academic staff are in place. However, there is a shortage of experts with a linguistic background for programme implementation.

- 6 1.5 - The higher education institution/ college ensures the collection and analysis of the information on the study achievements of the students, employment of the graduates, satisfaction of the students with the study programme, efficiency of the work of the academic staff, the study funds available and the disbursements thereof, as well as the key performance indicators of the higher education institution/ college.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The College gathers and analyses data on student achievements, graduate employment, student satisfaction with the study programme, and academic staff performance. This information is used to plan necessary changes and improvements in the implementation of the study courses.

- 7 1.6 - The higher education institution/ college ensures continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its quality assurance systems.

## **Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The College promotes ongoing enhancement, development, and effective performance of the study field by implementing quality assurance systems within the limits of available funding.

### **1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field**

#### **Analysis**

1.3.1. According to the SAR and the information provided during the experts' visit, the College is a unit of government institution (Agency <https://www.siva.gov.lv/en>) and the funding of the College is within the Agency's funding. Financial support for the study field "Translation" and the study programme is provided in the state budget.

As noted in SAR (p.25) financial resources are planned and monitored by the Agency's Finance Department in accordance with the planned number of state budget-funded study places in the College. The planned budget subsidy for 2024 is EUR 2,747,055.

The distribution of funding for the study programme is based on the following costs: remuneration of academic and administrative staff, premises and material and technical support, indirect costs. Information about study costs is provided in Table 2.3.1. (SAR, p.27) and it can be expressed as follows: 20% are indirect costs, 2% administration costs, 5% costs of the premises and materials, 72% remuneration. Overall, it can be concluded that on average 77% of the costs are directly related to supporting the teaching process, and approximately 23% are indirect and administrative costs.

According to information provided in SAR starting from the end of 2023, the Agency College has been granted funding for scientific and research activities. Within the allocated funds, it is planned to allocate EUR 6267.00 in 2024 for the improvement of the qualifications of the College's teaching staff, for scientific publications of the teaching staff, and for the replenishment of the material and technical base of the College (SAR, p. 27).

The College management, together with the Agency's Finance Department, has established a system for determining and redistributing the financial support required for the implementation of the study field and the corresponding study programme. According to the site visit, the system of allocating the funding for the study field is appropriate to the current situation where the college is fully integrated into the Agency.

1.3.2. According to the information in SAR (p. 28) and as observed during expert visits, the total area of the Agency's premises, where the College's study programmes are implemented, is 5976 m<sup>2</sup>, the area of the study and scientific work premises is 1572 m<sup>2</sup>, the area of the dormitories is 1416 m<sup>2</sup>, the area of the other premises – 2988 m<sup>2</sup>. 10 classrooms are available. On average, there are 18 student workstations in classrooms. The College uses modern classrooms equipped with computers, webcams, audio systems, projectors, and other technical aids to support the study process. Teaching staff have their own workspace with six workstations equipped with computers and a printer.

Microsoft Office 2019 (and later versions) is available in all classrooms, and specialised software (Adobe Photoshop) in some classrooms.

The classrooms have several computers with specialised in assistive technology or adaptive technology programmes and input/output devices for teaching visually impaired or blind people: a screen-reading programme: NVDA, hardware (Braille data input/output device), Braille printer (embosser), Braille display.

Internet access is available in the Agency's premises and in the dormitory. The use of the premises

corresponds to the specifics of each subject to be studied and is provided with the necessary teaching and learning materials. The material and technical base is regularly updated to support the study programme. In 2020, the purchase of computer equipment for classrooms was carried out. The College provides computers upon request for students studying remotely. Technical and material resources are sufficient to fully acquire the programme.

1.3.3. The Agency library is equipped with learning resources for the study field and programme. Every year the library's collection is updated with the latest available literature in Latvian, English, and German to meet the needs of teaching staff and students. According to the information provided in SAR (p. 28.), the library overall has 12987 books, including 10751 in Latvian, 1263 in English, and 540 in German (data on 1 November 2023). The library has 6 computers with Internet access. Books are also provided for students to take home. The total area of the library premises is 35 m<sup>2</sup>, allowing students to use the reading room and computer facilities. Library working hours are Monday, Wednesday, 11:00-17:30, Friday, 10:00-17:00, closed on Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays. As observed in the experts' visit, the study process at the college also takes place on Saturdays, so the management should evaluate the possibilities of providing library work on Saturdays as well.

The student qualification papers are available in printed form, which is an important source of information for other students.

The EBSCO database is available for use by the College's students, faculty, and staff since 2019. EBSCO is a multidisciplinary database of electronic journals and other electronic resources, consisting of several full-text and review databases. Between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023, the College's EBSCO database access was accessed by 2989 searches in 595 sessions. In the study process, students acquire the skills to work with literature resources available in the digital environment, electronic libraries such as Google Scholar, etc.

During the study course, students have the opportunity to get acquainted with the collections and databases of the National Library of Latvia.

The library has 130 books for the Sign Language Interpreter programme. Every year, the library's collection is updated with the latest literature. The library's book resources are renewed based on the faculty's demand for the latest literature within the available funding for the study course.

The College has close cooperation with the Latvian Association of the Deaf (LAD), as a result of which students of the College have access to digital and printed sign language teaching materials developed by LAD in the College library and online.

1.3.4. According to SAR (p. 29) and information provided during the experts visit, the College uses a Moodle environment, which contains materials that provide students with the opportunity to learn course content according to their individual abilities and information relevant to the content of each study course programme, including plan of the study programme, description of the study course, list of literature and information sources to be used for each study course, study materials, lecture materials, presentations on relevant topics, assignments and tasks for practical work, guidelines for writing internship and qualification theses. There is also information about the activities of the College's student council and events organised at the College. All materials are available to registered users, college students and academic staff.

The College also uses the Latvian E-klase where students can access a list of lectures, topics, and assignments. Academic staff communicate with students in the e-environment (Moodle and Latvian E-klase), providing both information and advisory support. The College assesses each student's individual capabilities to ensure a personalised approach.

1.3.5. The College is a unit of government institution (Social Integration State Agency) therefore the recruitment of personnel including academic staff is organised by the Agency's Personnel and Document Management Unit. The principles of personnel recruitment are in accordance with the principles of good governance, the laws and regulations of the Republic of Latvia, and the Internal Regulations of the Social Integration State Agency of 15.09.2015 No. 1-6/16 Regulations on Administrative and Academic Positions at the Social Integration State Agency College (provided in SER Annex No. 8).

The Head of College is directly involved in the recruitment and evaluation process. The number of positions of docents, lecturers and assistants and the terms of reference and duties of academic staff in an appropriate sector/subsector according to the study programmes to be carried out and the number of students and financial opportunities shall be determined by the College Board and approved by the Director of the Agency based on a submitted proposal of Head of the College.

After receiving the information on vacancies for academic positions from the Head of College, the Personnel and Document Management Unit is launching a competition for the vacant academic positions, publishing a notice in the official newspaper "Latvijas Vestnesis" and on the Agency's website. The contest shall be launched at least one month before the election.

According to SAR (p.30) and the Regulations on Administration and Academic Positions at the College, a selection board of applicants for academic positions is established for the recruitment and election of academic staff. The Board evaluates the documents submitted by the applicants and their compliance with the requirements of the Law on Higher Education Institutions and the regulations of the Agency.

After evaluating the submitted documents of the candidates, the Committee submits a recommendation to the College Council, responsible for organisation of the election of lecturers and/or assistant professors. Candidates who meet the requirements and criteria are invited to the elections. Applicants present their competencies in person and demonstrate their suitability for the position. The candidate shall be elected to the post of lecturer or assistant professor for a period of six years by a majority vote of the members of the College Council. Nonelected guest lecturers have a fixed-term contract of up to two years.

As was observed during the expert visit and information provided in SAR (p. 32) to provide students with natural sign language training and a better understanding of the culture, communication, and worldview of people with hearing impairments, several study courses in the field are taught by the College's academic staff members with hearing impairments who are native speakers of Latvian Sign Language. This provides students with the necessary professional skills and competences.

The procedures for attracting qualified teaching staff are open and clear and the stakeholders involved are informed about them.

1.3.6. Academic staff is required to regularly improve their competences according to the scope and specificity of their activities. According to the information provided in SAR (p.31.), academic and administrative staff regularly receive information on professional development seminars, courses and training organised by the Agency, as well as on opportunities offered by other institutions, and participate in seminars, projects, and conferences organised by the Agency and the College's cooperation partners.

The academic staff includes field professionals, and their professional activity motivates both students and teaching staff for career development and ensures that the study process is closely linked to the working environment, as well as adding high value to the quality of the study process. Internal Regulations No 1-6/23 'Regulations on Administrative and Academic Positions at the Social Integration State Agency College' (Annex No. 8) sets the requirements for the qualification and professional development of teaching staff. Considering the specifics of the narrow sector and the limited number of specialists, the teaching staff usually starts their work in the College as visiting

lecturers (SAR, p.32) and only after gaining experience and proving the quality of work the participation in the election of the academic staff is recommended. Nevertheless, a number of fully employed teachers remain extremely low.

The academic and support staff of the College regularly participate in internal trainings and briefings, which are mandatory for all staff members and are conducted in accordance with the Agency's health and safety regulations. The academic staff involved in the study field is informed about the courses offered by higher education institutions or organisations. Academic staff undergo mandatory training and annual briefings on occupational safety, fire safety, and IT security aspects. The training of academic staff in vocational rehabilitation and work with persons with disabilities is also provided, such as professional development seminars on working with people with disabilities, educational seminars on how to work with different risk groups, including people with various psychoneurological diseases, etc.

The College participates in Erasmus+ mobility projects, where members of academic staff can participate in training, gaining international experience. For example, in May 2024, seven College lecturers went to Portugal, where they participated in the "4C - Creativity, Communication, Collaboration, and Critical thinking" training.

The observations during the expert visit confirmed that the staff are motivated and actively use the professional training opportunities offered by the Agency to improve their qualifications and ensure the quality of their education. However, the specifics of the narrow sector and the small financial resources for research limit the possibilities for cooperation and development of the professional skills of academic staff as it was concluded during the experts' visit.

1.3.7. As highlighted in SAR (p. 32, also Appendix No. 30) 94% of academic staff (6 elected docents and 11 guest docents) are involved in study field work part-time. The lecturers teach several study courses, but the College workload is not very high. Also, according to observations during the visit of experts and provided information on teaching staff (SAR, Appendix No. 31), a significant number of teaching staff are sign language interpreters at the Latvian Association of Deaf (LAD) and the LAD Rehabilitation Centre.

The workload of academic staff is reflected in the tariff sheet, which is created according to the study plan. The planning and tariff sheet of the college study process is carried out by the College education methodologist, who monitors the workload of teaching staff.

In addition to teaching, lecturers are encouraged to conduct research work - prepare publications, present papers at annual conferences organised by the Agency. The academic staff is informed and follows current developments and innovations in the field of sign language and continuously improves their experience and the methodology and study materials used in the study process.

1.3.8. According to observations during the expert visit and information in SAR there is a very small number of students in the programme "Sign language interpreter", but they are very enthusiastic and dedicated to their studies and there is a very friendly and trustful atmosphere between students and teaching staff.

The main target group of the College is persons of working age with disabilities (average age 35+), the Agency's specialists provide a multiprofessional (psychologist, career support expert, social worker, etc.) and mutually integrated approach to the study process to ensure the social integration of students and their full participation in the job market. As observed during the Experts' visit, maximum support is provided to every vocational rehabilitation client and to every student of the Sign Language Interpreter study programme on an individual basis, according to their abilities, needs, and learning pace, preparing an individual study plan, if necessary.

According to SAR (p. 34) College has a diverse support staff:

1. College Office Administrator – manages the College's records, informs students about the College's activities, and studies;
2. Social workers – provide support in solving social problems, monitor students' progress, and attendance;
3. Career Support Expert – provides support in organising internships and career development, organising qualification theses, and career support for up to 6 months after graduation;
4. Psychologist – provides psychological support, group and individual counselling, motivation programme;
5. Librarian – ensures access to library resources;
6. Computer and network administrators – maintain and administer the College's computer networks and computer systems.

College students can use dormitories located on 68 Slokas iela and 59 Dubultu prospekts, Jūrmala. Students are housed in well-equipped dormitories with Internet access taking into account their state of health and functional impairments.

Students at the College can acquire the required course content online when studying outside of the College grounds.

The College has a student council, which represents students' interests and organises various activities. In general, the support available to students is appropriate, as indicated in student satisfaction surveys.

### **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

Conclusions:

College is a unit of government institutions – The Social Integration State Agency (Agency) (<https://www.siva.gov.lv/en>). This affects the college's budget, personnel management, and possibly other issues (e. g. real estate and building management). Financial resources are planned and monitored by the Agency's Finance Department in accordance with the planned number of state budget-funded study places in the College. The system of allocating funding for the study field is appropriate to the current situation where the college is fully integrated in the Agency. The College premises, classrooms, library and other facilities used in the study process are equipped with the necessary material and technical resources and are at a satisfactory level.

Library resources, databases, and services are mainly appropriate for the basic requirements of the study field. The library has several databases, books, and accessible materials; there is a support centre for Moodle, Zoom, and distance learning environments. The Moodle e-study platform is used to provide students with the opportunity to study course content according to their individual abilities and information relevant to the content of each study course program.

In general, technological solutions are considered suitable to facilitate the study process.

The College as part of the Agency has a quite transparent system for attracting qualified teaching staff. The supportive atmosphere, individual student-centred approach, and psychological support are noticeable.

The various study courses in the field are taught by members of the academic staff of the College with hearing impairments who are native speakers of the Latvian Sign Language and also Latvian Sign Language interpreters who are actively working in the Latvian Association of Deaf.

Strengths:

1. Financial support for the study field “Translation” and study programme is granted in the state budget.
2. The technical and material resources including the premises and library are sufficient.

Weaknesses:

1. The specifics of the narrow sector and the small financial resources for research limit the possibilities for cooperation and development of professional skills of academic staff.
2. Library working hours are not coordinated with study time on Saturdays.

## **1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation**

### **Analysis**

1.4.1. SISA College Development and investment strategy 2021-2027 states that “The Agency's College provides vocational first-level higher education for persons with disabilities or foreseeable disabilities of working age, with five study fields and psychosocial support during their education. The Agency also implements a study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” (professional qualification “Sign Language Interpreter”) in the field of study “Translation”, which provides social protection measures for persons with disabilities, i.e., it trains specialists who are able to provide the necessary support to persons with hearing impairments (Annex 1, p.3). In the same document, “Insufficient research work” (Annex 1, p. 19) is identified as the College staff weakness, which to some extent could be applicable to the teaching staff of the short-cycle study programme “Sign language interpreter”. One more mention in the same document is on p. 23 where the description of The Research and Methodological Council is presented. It is stated that The Research and Methodological Council, in collaboration with the programme leaders, are to develop and approve current topics of qualification theses, practical researches to be offered to students for the development of their qualification thesis, and one of the tasks for the improvement of the work of the Methodological Commissions and the Research and Methodological Council is planned to facilitate research activity during the period of 2021-2027 (Annex No. 1, p. 24). In the strategic directions No. 2 (To improve the quality of governance for effective change management) and No. 3 (To improve internationalisation and collaboration) there are mentions relevant to the development of scientific and/or applied research and teaching staff research competence, namely under M2. To improve the College's personnel policy, ensuring a quality teaching staff and educational process, it is planned to “to attract staff with active research activities and support their professional and academic improvement” (p. 34), and further point M2. To ensure that students and teaching staff are involved in collaboration projects to promote research, mobility, and exchange of experience (p. 35) might be considered relevant to the development of research.

The SAR highlights that “The College’s research activities are assessed as making a significant contribution to the development of the College and the vocational rehabilitation service, providing opportunities for the development of both the students and the academic staff, as well as the development of rehabilitation services and education at the national level” (p. 35) as the members of the teaching staff involved in the “Translation” study field carry out scientific activities appropriate to their field and scientific qualification by participating in conferences, seminars, webinars, as well as conducting research. This statement can be confirmed by the data provided in Annex 32 “List of scientific publications, artistic creations, participation in conferences and research projects of the teaching staff in the field of study “Translation” 2017/2023”. Annex No. 32.1. “Summary of quantitative data on scientific and/ or applied research activities corresponding to the study field in the reporting period” reports that during 2018-2023 there were 20 cases of participation of teaching staff in projects and 24 cases of presentations in conferences and publications by teaching staff in the mentioned period. Appendix 32 presents more detailed data and its analysis shows that the following activities might be considered directly connected to the study field under assessment: 7, 8, 12, 16, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25. Some of the teaching staff members were active in the development of the research in the study field “Translation” in the

period under evaluation.

Overall, it could be argued that since the main part of the teaching staff is guest lecturers and because of the educational level of a short-cycle vocational higher education, there have been very limited resources for funding of scientific activities. However, starting from the end of 2023, the College has been granted funding for scientific and research activities, as noted in SAR, “it is planned to allocate EUR 6267.00 in 2024 for the improvement of the qualifications of the College's teaching staff, for scientific publications of the teaching staff and for the replenishment of the material and technical base of the College” (p. 27). Nevertheless, in on-site visit meetings or in the submitted SAR documents, there are no implications that the College and representatives of the study field have been trying to get funding from third parties.

1.4.2. The study field and the study process is aiming at connecting the students with the working life in the industry. The annual College research conferences can be a good example of involving academic staff, students, and experts in the field for joined discussions and raising the public understanding of building an inclusive society. The students of the study programme “Sign language interpreter” are offered opportunities to present their findings of their qualification thesis where they identify problems, solutions, and innovations in the everyday work of sign language interpreters and in the development of the Latvian Sign Language.

The internship report might be another example of student engagement in scientific activities, as they have to present the findings of applied research in investigating a problem faced by sign language interpreters in a working environment and make suggestions for improvement, thus making it possible for the organisation to use their suggestions in practice.

From the first year of study, students are introduced to the specifics of research in the course “Introduction to studies” (2CP) where one of the objectives is to prepare students for applied research activities (write reports, essays, coursework, qualification papers, understand plagiarism and self-plagiarism, search for academically relevant information in library resources) (Appendix Course descriptions).

In the third semester, students take the course “Scientific research methodology” leading to the preparation of the qualification thesis, the synergy of which has positive results, as confirmed by the graduates during the on-site visit. Despite these highlighted facts, there is no sufficient information provided how scientific and / or applied research and the outcomes thereof are integrated in the study process in the study programme from the perspective of academic staff. The identification of strategic subfields in the study field might be a basis for effective and constructive involvement of academic staff into scientific and/or applied research.

1.4.3. International cooperation in the SAR is presented through collaboration examples of gaining experience and improving the quality of the study programme (p. 37). It is highlighted that the academic staff of the study programme “Sign language interpreter” cooperate with other European and global higher education institutions that train sign language interpreters, with educational institutions that provide training for people with hearing impairments, and with organisations representing the deaf, such as Gallaudet University in the USA, Tallinn Helen's School in Estonia, Iceland Communication Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, World Association of Sign Language Interpreters. Nevertheless, during the on-site visit the expert panel were told that the cooperation with, e.g., Gallaudet University, Stockholm University Sign Language Department was fragmented due to their low interest in the possible cooperation. The SAR (pp. 36-37) presents a number of cases of international cooperation that took place during the evaluation period but are not directly connected to the scientific development of the study field “Translation”. They are undoubtedly important for the overall engagement of students into the working environment and should be



continued, but special attention should also be paid to joining or initiating projects in the study field of translation. Although the cooperation with social partners (e.g., LAD) is extensive, the academic staff in the study field could cooperate with universities and companies at the national, regional, and international levels. Research cooperation with external partners might take various forms: implementation of joint research projects, participation in implementation of outsourced research by external partners, providing consultations, etc.

1.4.4. The SAR doesn't provide any specific information on the mechanisms developed for the participation of teaching staff in scientific research and/or applied research, except for a few examples, namely the organisation of annual scientific or scientific-practical conferences for the College, "participating in conferences organised by other institutions, an attendee and as an expert, as the Agency has accumulated a wealth of experience working with people with disabilities and functional impairments" (SAR, p. 38). These examples might be more associated with the Agency itself than with the academic staff of the study field under evaluation. In SAR there is information that "the College recommends and motivates the teaching staff of the Sign Language Interpreter study programme to participate in research projects with the College's partner organisations" (p. 38), but no detailed process is described. During the on-site visit, the expert panel asked the teaching staff about their involvement in the research activities. Most of the teaching staff indicated that their supervision of the preparation of the students' qualification thesis is considered as scientific research. But there are only two cases of conference presentations by students. So there is a lack of sufficient information on the joined supervisor student publications.

1.4.5. The students of the study programme "Sign language interpreter" are participating at annual scientific conferences organised by the LAC as their reports "cover unique topics not explored in detail in Latvia, such as sign language research, inclusion of people with hearing impairments in society and other topical issues " (SAR, p. 38). The possibility to choose qualification thesis topics that are related to the labour market was also mentioned by the graduates during the on-site visit and might be considered as a positive factor for raising their willingness to present the findings in the conference. Taking into account the low number of students in the study programme "Sign language interpreter", the overall students' involvement in presenting their findings at conferences might be considered as an advantage for the further development of the study field.

1.4.6. The SAR describes a number of ways in which innovative solutions can be applied in the study field (p. 38), e. g., annual informative and practical seminars for employers "Brunch with added value", "Thinking workshop by the sea", where students and experts in the field are invited to share their experience in employing persons with disabilities, which promotes the well-being and effective cooperation of both employers and employees. Although this is not directly related to the study process, it does influence changes in the content and approach of the study process by developing professional competency and creating an inclusive environment. The overall impression based on the SAR and on-site meetings can be concluded as a prevailing study process organisation approach is more based on traditional methods rather than on innovative ones. International cooperation and research projects are also listed as applicable innovative solutions beneficial for a significant positive impact on the study process. The expert panel strongly advises to continue and strengthen the latter two as they might serve as a stimulus for deeper academic staff participation in research activities.

## Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses

### Conclusions:

The expert panel strongly believes that there is a need for more robust mechanisms to support and encourage research activities among the teaching staff. The recent allocation of funding for research activities is a positive step, but sustained investment is necessary to ensure continuous improvement and support for scientific activities. While there have been some efforts to collaborate internationally, these need to be more consistent and targeted towards enhancing the scientific development of the study field under evaluation.

International cooperation, while present, has been limited, with fragmented collaborations. More attention is needed to initiate projects in the study field of Translation and foster research cooperation with external national, regional, and international partners. The involvement of students in research from the first year and through activities like internships and conferences is commendable. This engagement not only prepares them for the labour market but also contributes to the overall research output of the College. Innovative initiatives to enhance the study process should be expanded and integrated more deeply into the academic and research framework of the College, and particularly pointed towards the study field and study programme under evaluation.

### Strengths:

1. Some applied science involvement possibilities are ensured for the students during the study process.
2. Some of the study programme “Sign language interpreter” courses serve as a good base to introduce students to scientific and/ or applied research.
3. Continuously engaging and linking students with industry needs.

### Weaknesses:

1. No strategic approach towards the development of scientific and/or applied research.
2. Lack of research interest from academic staff.
3. No support structures for staff involvement in scientific and/or applied research activities.
4. Lack of mechanisms encouraging the academic staff for international activities.

## Assessment of the requirement [2]

- 1 R2 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the level of development of scientific research and artistic creation (if applicable)

### **Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

The current status in scientific and/or applied research lacks a strategic approach including financial resources (local and third parties' funding), international /institutional cooperation as well as academic staff engagement.

## 1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation

### Analysis

1.5.1. The college has established very close cooperation with industry, such as the Latvian Association of the Deaf, which is the largest employer of sign language interpreters in Latvia, as well as all special educational institutions in Latvia that need the following specialists: Riga Raiņa Secondary School, Riga Ēbelmuiža Primary School, and Valmiera Gauja Bank Secondary School development centre (SAR, p. 40). In addition to that, the college has established cooperation throughout Latvia in order not only to provide specialists, but also for students to have practice and work opportunities as close as possible to their place of residence (SAR, p. 39). From 2017 until 2023

there have been 26 graduates, of which 77.77 % work in the industry (SAR, p. 51). After the site visit, it was clear that the choice not to work in this industry was made by them in search of better pay or because they wanted to link their careers with another industry.

Cooperation is created to promote the exchange of experience and improve the study programme according to the current affairs of the industry, development of academic and scientific research projects, joint organisation of seminars, conferences, and other events (SAR, p. 41). However, after the on-site visit, it was clear that academic and scientific research is very limited and only started in 2023 as additional funding had been granted (SAR, p. 44).

It is with the Latvian Association of the Deaf that the closest long-term cooperation has been developed. Under the authority of this institution are two institutions. The first one is SIA "LNS Rehabilitācijas centrs", which has several branches throughout Latvia, thus providing a lot of work and internship places for both students and graduates. The second is LAD Rītausma culture centre that offers previously mentioned options for students and graduates as well. Representatives of this Association are also involved in the composition of the commission for the evaluation of qualification works and also give lectures and act as teaching staff (SAR, p. 41). In addition, from this cooperation, the materials developed by the Association are available to students in both digital and printed format (SAR, p. 59). At the same time, the site visit revealed that this cooperation has become so close that the College's autonomy in decision-making is beginning to disappear, which can hinder the development of the study field.

Representatives of the industry are closely involved in the development of the programme, through various questionnaires, as well as in the creation of a new professional standard, according to which the study programme was also adjusted. Employers in the industry are also included in the commission for the defence of qualification thesis.

Through cooperation with industry, students are introduced to deaf society and culture, along with the opportunity to communicate better and apply knowledge practically. After talking to the student, it was confirmed that the students are taken on excursions to deaf theatre performances and other cultural events that help to achieve this goal.

Considering that the college is the only HEI in Latvia that trains sign language interpreters, cooperation with other Latvian HEI is very limited. Cooperation agreements have been concluded with Riga Technical University, College of Administration, College of Business Administration, College of Law, Riga Technical College, ISMA Information Systems Management Institute, and the University of Latvia with the aim of promoting information exchange, organisation of internships and study tours, as well as publication of jointly created scientific or scientific-methodical works (SAR, p. 41). One of the successful and noteworthy examples could be considered involvement of academic staff with the Liepāja University project on developing a sign language corpus (Project "Data-based sign language"). This project aims to develop guidelines and a pilot corpus for Latvian sign language, contributing to the field of linguistic analysis and language technology development.

1.5.2. The College has tried to cooperate with international institutions, but without success. According to the on-site visit there had been attempts to cooperate with Iceland, but considering that the academic and scientific research side of the industry is stagnant in Latvia, there has been no interest in forming this cooperation due to the lack of funding but since 2023, the College has been granted additional funding for scientific and research activities (SAR, p. 44).

During the visit to the site, differences in sign language between regions were mentioned as a reason not to establish cooperation, but cooperation can be useful for the exchange of experiences for the development of the industry and for the improvement of the study programme, after which it could be implemented and adapted to the use of sign language in the Latvian region.

1.5.3. The College has been implementing two ERASMUS + projects for both students and teaching staff since 2023 (SAR, p. 44). One of the projects is organised in the short term for both the students and the teaching staff with the possibility of going to Astangu Kutser rehabilitatsioonikeskus (Estonia), Mariaberg e.V. (Germany), Fondazione don Carlo Gnocchi (Italy) (SAR, p. 43). However, this opportunity has not been used by the students because most of the students are working, who do not have the opportunity to go abroad for a longer period, which was clarified in a conversation with college representatives. Due to differences in sign languages between regions, student mobility is not encouraged, because it is not possible to practically learn the sign language of the Latvian region (SAR, p. 44). The second is the Erasmus+ project for teaching staff, within the framework of which cooperation will still be formed with the host organisation "Magic Cinderella Lda" with the aim of introducing creative teaching methods, as the institution specialises in organising training courses in areas such as green education, technology and innovation, personal development skills and equal opportunities (SAR, p. 43).

So far, the recruitment of foreign lecturers has been based on the voluntary principle, as there has been no separate funding allocated directly to the recruitment of guest lecturers, but since 2024, additional funding has been allocated and the recruitment is planned to be carried out this year (SAR, p. 44).

### **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

#### **Conclusions:**

The college has a very strong and close cooperation with the industry, uniting all institutions that need sign language specialists in Latvia. In this way, the involvement of the industry in the development of the direction is also ensured within the limits of the possibilities. The desire to get involved is visible on the part of the industry as well. Cooperation with other Latvian HEIs is limited. Collaborations with other HEIs are in the process of establishing, but mostly with the aim of promoting the exchange of information, organisation of internships and study tours.

International cooperation of the College is very minimal. There have been attempts to create one with other European institutions, but unsuccessfully.

Students and lecturers are offered ERASMUS+ mobility opportunities.

Foreign instructors have not been recruited due to lack of funding and regional differences in sign language.

The panel of experts believes that regional differences should not be a reason not to create international cooperations, as the experience can be used in the organisational development of the field of study and in the implementation of research.

#### **Strengths:**

1. Cooperation has been developed with all industry representatives and institutions that need sign language interpreters in Latvia, thus making the deaf community even closer and obtaining information on all current affairs in the industry to improve the direction of studies;
2. Students are introduced to the deaf environment through collaborations, thus increasing their knowledge about communication and culture.

#### **Weaknesses:**

1. Erasmus+ study mobility is only a formal opportunity which students do not use and is not promoted due to regional sign language differences.
2. Collaborations are not fully used for the development of the field of study, especially for the creation of academic and scientific research.

3. Academic and scientific research cooperation with foreign universities has not been concluded.
4. So far, it has not been possible to attract foreign lecturers.
5. The College has not elaborated the mechanisms for increasing international activities for students and for the academic staff.

### **Assessment of the requirement [3]**

- 1 R3 - The cooperation implemented within the study field with various Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field.

#### **Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

Lately, the College started to cooperate with institutions in Latvia but the cooperation with foreign ones still should be established. It was one of the recommendations in the previous assessment and yet, has not been taken into account.

### **1.6. Implementation of the Recommendations Received During the Previous Assessment Procedures**

#### **Analysis**

1.6.1. The recommendations of experts given in the previous accreditation of the study field for the previous assessment period and the SISA comments about implementation are provided in SAR (p. 44-45). It should be noted that a previous assessment of the study field "Translation" took place in 2011- 2012 and the recommendations specified in this report were received on January 24, 2012. The study programme "Sign language interpreter" (41227) received a rating of "sustainable" based on the categories of sustainable, challenged and non-sustainable.

As noted in SAR (p. 45) taking into account the fact that the College implements one study programme in the respective study field (i.e. Translation), the implementation of the recommendations of the accreditation commission cannot be separated for the study field and the programme, the recommendations apply to the field and the programme as a whole.

The recommendations received previously are as follows:

1. All the academic staff should participate in research.

The College provided the following justification for the implementation of this recommendation: "All study programme faculty members are involved in research as research advisors for qualification theses, and by participating in conferences. The College's teaching staff members are involved in research projects in the field and in the development of new methodological materials (Annex No 32)". While efforts have been made to involve faculty members in research as advisors for qualification theses and participation in conferences, there remains a gap in broader research engagement. As noted during the on-site visit, faculty members are generally not involved in extensive applied research work beyond these roles. Moreover, the present expert panel strongly believes that deeper engagement in scientific activities is highly recommended for the further development of the field of Translation and participation in international linguistic and specifically translation conferences is highly encouraged. The College could also improve research participation by collaborating with other academic institutions in fields such as translation studies and linguistics, which could provide a broader scope for faculty research and development. Collaborations with larger universities could help in data collection and empirical studies, enriching both faculty expertise and programme content, as well as awareness of the Latvian sign language. A significant and interesting unique data is represented by this study field in the College, and it is important to share it with the international scientific community. Therefore, this recommendation was taken into account, but considered as partially completed, and has to be continued to fulfil.

2. International cooperation with educational institutions running similar study programmes must be developed.

The College provided the following justification of the implementation of this recommendation: “The head of the study programme and some of the programme’s instructors are members of LAD, which ensures continuous cooperation with foreign organisations and educational institutions implementing similar study programmes in the implementation of joint experience exchange projects. Since 2023, the College has been actively involved in ERASMUS+ activities. The College is in the process of establishing cooperation and negotiations with institutions in Lithuania and Iceland.” Long-term cooperation with LAD undoubtedly might be considered as an added value asset to the study field and the programme under assessment. Nevertheless, the College is a provider of a short-cycle higher vocational education in the field of translation, and direct cooperation with other educational institutions running similar study programmes should be beneficial not only for teaching staff but also for students as well as for the overall development of the study programme and the field. Although in SAR (p.41) it is highlighted that “the College implements one program in the field of study “Translation”, the study program “Sign language interpreter”, which is specific and represents a narrow sector, accordingly, the opportunities for cooperation are limited”, some cases of planned cooperation are mentioned (SAR, p. 45). The College’s involvement in Erasmus + framework projects (SAR, p. 43-44) that are only partially connected to the field under assessment is highly appreciated, but joining or initiating projects directly linked to the Translation field would be beneficial. The SISA College could focus on forming strategic partnerships with universities offering programmes in translation and linguistics to facilitate knowledge exchange and research collaboration. Potential partners could include Stockholm University (Sign Language Linguistics) and University of Amsterdam, which have robust linguistics and translation studies programmes. Thus, this recommendation has been taken into account only recently, is considered partially completed, and has to be continued to fulfil.

### **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

#### **Conclusions:**

The recommendations received in the previous assessment could be considered partially implemented. There are still ongoing issues with the problematic areas identified in 2012. However, it should be highlighted that the recommendations from the previous assessment are in process, so this expert panel can only advise to continue further with the implementation thereof.

#### **Strengths:**

1. The College is in the process of negotiations to establish cooperation with institutions in Lithuania and Iceland.
2. Some of the College’s teaching staff are involved in research projects in the field and in the development of new methodological materials (e.g., Project “Data-based sign language” with Liepāja University (RTU Liepāja)).

#### **Weaknesses:**

1. Research efforts could be geared towards involvement of all teaching staff in the field under assessment and international recognizability.
2. Currently, there are no agreements with educational institutions working in the same study field as well as running similar study programmes.

### **Assessment of the requirement [4]**

- 1 R4 - Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided.

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

The recommendations received in the previous assessment could be considered partially implemented, as only during past years some actions have been taken from the College part to try to establish international cooperation. As for the recommendation of involving all academic staff into research, it is not implemented to the full and the present expert panel strongly believes that deeper engagement of the academic staff in scientific activities is highly recommended for the further development of the field under assessment.

## 1.7. Recommendations for the Study Field

### Short-term recommendations

1. Cooperation with other Latvian HEIs and internationalisation overall in the study field of translation pertaining to sign language interpreting should be continuously developed. Select a few international partners for cooperation in scientific and / or applied research as well as relevant Erasmus+ partners, creating possibilities for short term exchange of students and teachers.
2. Implement targeted support systems to address the high dropout rates, especially in the second year of studies. This can include additional tutoring, mentoring programs, and stress management workshops.
3. Enhance marketing campaigns to attract a wider pool of applicants. Utilise social media, partnerships with high schools, and community events to raise awareness about the programme.
4. Continuously update the curriculum based on stakeholder feedback and labour market demands. Incorporate emerging technologies and methodologies in sign language interpretation.
5. Ensure diverse perspectives in the study field and programme's governance by involving a variety of stakeholders in decision-making processes, thus ensuring objectivity and the effectiveness of quality assurance.
6. Incorporate digital and AI-related integrity issues to ensure that AI-generated content is properly acknowledged, reflecting modern academic challenges and preventing misuse of technology.
7. Develop an independent college website to enhance visibility and to establish a distinct identity while promoting the College programmes more effectively.

### Long-term recommendations

1. The expert panel recommends that the College takes appropriate steps to create the possibility for academic staff to be fully employed.
2. Encourage faculty and students to engage in research by providing resources, support, and incentives. Establish a research centre or lab focused on sign language and interpreting studies.
3. Develop clear study paths for graduates to pursue further education in related BA and MA programmes both in Latvia and internationally.

4. Reduce dependency on a single industry partner by establishing relationships with a broader range of employers and organisations. This will mitigate risks and provide students with diverse internship and employment opportunities.

## **II - "Sign Language Interpreter" ASSESSMENT**

### **II - "Sign Language Interpreter" ASSESSMENT**

#### **2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme**

##### **Analysis**

2.1.1. The study field of "Translation" at the Social Integration State Agency College encompasses the short-cycle professional higher education programme "Sign Language Interpreter" (code 41227). This programme uniquely aligns with the study field by focussing on the linguistic and interpretative skills necessary to facilitate communication for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. It offers a vital service that addresses a significant societal need, ensuring the integration of individuals with hearing impairments into broader social and professional contexts.

The strategic goal of the programme is to prepare competent professionals who can accurately translate between the Latvian Sign Language and spoken languages (Latvian and English), meeting the demands of the labour market while supporting the inclusion of individuals with hearing impairments. The programme is the only one of its kind in Latvia, highlighting its compliance with national language policies and its alignment with the strategic goals of the College to support social integration through education.

The programme provides a curriculum that includes mostly practical components of translation studies, as well as specialised training in sign language interpretation. The study programme is designed to ensure that students gain proficiency in interpreting sign language accurately and fluently, a critical requirement for their future roles.

During the on-site visit, the dedication to meeting strategic goals was evident through interactions with both the administration and teaching staff. The programme strives to offer a balance between linguistic theory and practical interpretation skills. However, it was noted that there is room for improvement in integrating more comprehensive training in interpreting from and into English to fully achieve the intended learning outcomes.

Although the programme effectively addresses the practical aspects of sign language interpretation, there is a notable absence of sufficient linguistic and translatology theory, which is crucial to developing a deeper understanding of the translation process and improving students' analytical skills. Incorporating these theoretical components would strengthen the programme and better equip students to meet the complexities of modern translation demands, as well as help to preserve Latvian sign language and research it.

The compliance of the study programme with the field of translation is evident through its focus on the language, cultural, and ethical dimensions of interpretation. By offering this specialised training, the programme mostly complies with the study field of translation by catering to a specific and critical niche in communication services.

Overall, the "Sign Language Interpreter" programme is mostly aligned with the study field of translation by preparing students for a highly specialised and in-demand role, supporting both societal needs and the strategic educational objectives of the college. Although the changes in curriculum referring to the linguistic and translation theories should be beneficial for the quality of the study programme.



2.1.2. The short-cycle professional higher education programme “Sign Language Interpreter” at the Social Integration State Agency College has been designed to ensure coherence among its title, code, professional qualification, aims, objectives, learning outcomes, and admission requirements. This design aims to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective interpretation between Latvian Sign Language (LSL) and spoken languages (Latvian and English).

#### Title and Code

The title “Sign Language Interpreter” accurately reflects the primary focus of the programme on training interpreters for LSL and spoken languages. The programme code (41227) aligns with the educational programme classification, clearly situating it within the translation and interpreting study field. This code facilitates easy identification and access within national and international educational systems.

#### Professional Qualification

The programme qualifies graduates as “Sign Language Interpreters”. This qualification is particularly significant in Latvia, where the demand for professionals in this field is growing, reflecting the alignment of the programme with national educational goals and market needs.

#### Aims and Objectives

The programme aims to prepare professionally competent sign language interpreters who can effectively facilitate communication between deaf and hearing communities. The objectives focus on developing students’ proficiency in both LSL and English, enhancing their understanding of the cultural and ethical aspects of interpreting, and equipping them with practical skills for various professional contexts.

#### Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of the programme are well-defined and comprehensive:

1. Planning the interpretation service delivery process.
2. Translating between LSL and spoken languages with accuracy and stylistic consistency.
3. Understanding communication methods and techniques with deaf people.
4. Developing bilingual communication competence.
5. Utilising information technology in the interpretation process.
6. Knowledge of relevant laws, standards, and ethics.
7. Evaluating professional performance and understanding lifelong learning’s importance.

These outcomes ensure that graduates are well-prepared for the diverse challenges they may face in their professional roles. However, more attention must be paid to the skill of translating Latvian sign language into Latvian or English sound language and vice versa.

#### Duration, Scope, and Language

The duration of the two-year programme corresponds to Level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This duration is appropriate to achieve the intended learning outcomes and prepare students for professional practice. The scope of the programme covers the required programme parts complying with the state standards. As SAR (p. 54) highlights the content and scope of the study programme is relevant to the professional qualification, the objective and tasks of the professional qualification, and provides achievable results, as confirmed by the results of qualification papers, employer surveys and graduate employment rates. Scope of the study programme is 120 credits, the programme content includes general education study courses (30 credits), field study courses (54 credits), internship (6 credits) and qualification practice (18 credits), as well as the development of qualification thesis (12 credits) to ensure the skills, knowledge and

abilities necessary to perform the tasks of professional activity, as well as to fulfil the objectives of the study programme and achieve the goal. The study programme is conducted entirely in Latvian, which aligns with the objectives of the programme and supports the development of student proficiency in both spoken and sign language communication.

Admission requirements are outlined in SAR (p. 53), stating that “admitted to full-time studies under the study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” at the expense of the state budget on a competitive basis shall be persons who have submitted all the documents stipulated in the College's Admission Regulations, successfully passed the state centralised examinations in Latvian and foreign language, as well as the College entrance examination, which has been approved by the Research and Methodological Council and corresponds to profession of sign language interpreter”. Despite the fact that the College organises the entrance examination, the drop-out rate is very high. The added value of identified tasks of the study programme “Sign language interpreter” is not clear, and it looks like some of them deal with the management of the study programme more than the outcomes (No. 1, 5).

2.1.3. Concerning the detailed corrections to the study programme's parameters there is no information provided in SAR. Based on the on-site meetings it could be stated that the College is currently in the process of transferring the credit systems from national to ECTS.

According to SAR (p.56) in the academic year 2023/2024, the study programme has also been updated in line with the new professional standard "Sign Language Interpreter", labour market trends and demand. It is also claimed that the content of study courses is reviewed and updated at the beginning of each academic year to include current topics in line with labour market trends and innovations, which the programme leader and lecturers actively follow through self-study and/or courses, seminars and conferences (SAR, p. 56). It was partially confirmed during the on-site visit as many surveys are carried out continuously. Although during the on-site meeting with teaching staff the procedures of changing the course content were not clearly disclosed.

This study programme offers students a comprehensive vocational higher education, equipping them with the qualification of a sign language interpreter. Graduates gain the necessary skills to interpret effectively and support individuals with hearing impairments. The curriculum covers essential areas such as sign language linguistics, interpreting techniques, and cultural competence, ensuring that students develop both practical interpreting abilities and an understanding of Deaf culture. Additionally, the programme includes additional courses to provide students with foundational knowledge in educational psychology and teaching methodologies.

The professional qualification attained through this programme aligns with the classifications specified in regulatory provisions, ensuring that graduates meet industry standards and are prepared to work professionally as sign language interpreters.

2.1.4. The study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” at SISA College presents a unique educational opportunity within Latvia, addressing a critical need for skilled interpreters proficient in both Latvian Sign Language and spoken languages. The programme's economic and social justification is rooted in the growing demand for qualified interpreters to support the inclusion and communication needs of the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities. Given Latvia's unique linguistic landscape, interpreters play a crucial role in facilitating communication across different language modalities, thereby enhancing accessibility in various sectors such as education, healthcare, and public services.

The dynamics of the programme, as detailed in the statistical data from 2016 to 2024 (Annex No. 36), indicates a fluctuating student enrolment and a notable dropout rate, particularly attributed to the challenges of students to balance full-time studies with work and personal responsibilities. This

challenge is compounded by the rigorous demands of acquiring proficiency in both sign and spoken languages, which require a significant investment in time. Over the years, the programme has maintained a consistent intake of students funded by the state budget, underscoring its strategic importance in addressing national educational and social needs.

Despite the challenges in student retention, the programme shows promise in aligning graduates with the needs of the labour market. Surveys from employers and graduates reveal that a significant majority find the skills acquired through the programme relevant and applicable to their professional duties. However, the data also highlight areas for improvement, such as improving the programme's support mechanisms to better accommodate working students. The programme could benefit from flexible scheduling, part-time study options, and additional support services to reduce dropout rates and better serve students who balance multiple responsibilities. Additionally, continuous engagement with industry stakeholders and alumni can help refine the curriculum to meet evolving market demands and technological advances in the field of sign language interpretation.

2.1.5. Not applicable.

### **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

Conclusions:

Overall, the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter" at SISA College is a vital educational initiative that addresses key societal needs. By focussing on the identified weaknesses, particularly through curriculum enhancements and greater flexibility in programme delivery, the programme can further strengthen its impact and effectiveness in preparing graduates for the dynamic demands of the workforce.

Strengths:

1. The programme is the only one of its kind in Latvia, addressing a critical need for skilled interpreters. It plays a vital role in promoting accessibility and inclusion for the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities within the country.
2. The programme is in alignment with the labour market, producing graduates who possess skills and competencies relevant to current demands in sectors such as education, healthcare and public services. Employer feedback indicates a high level of satisfaction with graduates' preparedness and ability to meet job requirements.
3. Consistent state funding reflects the strategic importance of the programme and its commitment to addressing national educational and social priorities. This financial backing helps maintain the programme's sustainability and accessibility to students across Latvia.
4. The programme has shown a commitment to improvement by incorporating feedback from stakeholders, including students, graduates, and employers.

Weaknesses:

1. The programme experiences significant dropout rates, mainly due to students' difficulties in balancing full-time studies with work and personal commitments. This indicates the need for more flexible study options, such as part-time or online courses, to accommodate diverse student needs.
2. Although there is effort to establish international partnerships, the programme currently lacks substantial collaboration with foreign institutions. Increasing these collaborations could provide valuable insights and innovations in teaching methodologies and curriculum development.
3. The courses in linguistic and translation theories should be incorporated into the curriculum in order to enhance its relevance and effectiveness.

## 2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

### Analysis

2.2.1. The curriculum of the study programme “Sign language interpreter” is structured into general education courses, specialised education courses, an optional study course, internships, and a qualification thesis. This structure provides a balanced education, combining theoretical knowledge with practical skills:

- General Education Courses (30 CP) include language courses, psychology, business, law, IT, and occupational safety, which are foundational for any interpreter.
- Specialised Education Courses (54 CP): Focus on LSL grammar, deaf psychology, simultaneous translation, and specific terminology.
- Several internships (24 CP): Provide real-world experience and practical application of skills.
- Qualification Thesis (12 CP): Allows students to demonstrate their comprehensive understanding and skills.

No major new study programmes have been introduced in this field since the last evaluation. However, curriculum updates have been aligned with labour market demands and professional standards, including the introduction of a business model as required by new education laws.

The SAR (p. 57) highlights that the academic staff of the College is professional, has relevant experience and competencies, and that the study process employs different pedagogical methods. This includes integrating certain technological advancements and scientific research into the curriculum, along with providing students access to current literature and information sources (SAR, p. 57). However, during the site visit on 24.07.2024, it was noted that the latest scientific research and innovations in the field are not adequately reflected in the linguistic courses. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that lecturers teaching these courses do not have formal education in linguistics, which is essential for a programme focused on sign language interpreting, a specialised field within linguistics, including sign language and translation studies. This lack of expertise poses a risk to the academic rigour and quality of the programme, potentially affecting the preservation and development of the Latvian natural sign language.

Involving deaf lecturers in the programme is a commendable step toward inclusivity and authenticity. However, it is important to note that in many other European countries, Deaf lecturers often possess professional linguistic qualifications. Typically, Deaf individuals are invited to the educational process as native signers, demonstrating correct signs while being accompanied by interpreters to ensure accuracy and depth in linguistic education. The course titled "Grammar and Plasticity of Latvian Sign Language" does not effectively cover grammatical structures, but rather focuses on general and historical aspects. The term “plasticity” is not relevant to the grammatical systems of sign languages. Therefore, the hiring of academic staff with a linguistic background is crucial to advance the research and preservation of the Latvian sign language.

Despite the impact of the Erasmus exchange programme for staff and students, there is a noticeable gap in international communication and awareness of global advancements in sign language and translation studies. This is evident in the study programme's course descriptions, which lack references to the latest literature and research in these fields.

In general, the content of the study programme is results-oriented. However, several courses, such as Personality Psychology, Scientific Research Methodology, Interpersonal Psychology and Business Communication, Business Basics, Social Economy, and Legal Basis of Employment lack specific content related to Deaf and Deafness issues. Furthermore, translation studies courses do not adequately cover theoretical foundations, which are critical for developing a comprehensive understanding of the translation process.

Several key courses are missing from the curriculum, such as phonology, grammar, and lexicology of Latvian sign language. As observed during the on-site visit, the lecturers lack theoretical knowledge in lexicology, phonology, grammar, and terminology. This gap was anticipated given the

absence of linguists in the teaching staff. Currently, Latvian sign language remains an under researched area. Although it presents a challenge for the College to recruit qualified specialists, there are opportunities to collaborate with international experts in sign language studies to enhance the programme.

The programme's curriculum would benefit from a greater emphasis on theoretical frameworks in linguistics and translation studies, providing students with a complete understanding of both sign and spoken languages. Integrating more theoretical frameworks in linguistics and translation studies into the curriculum would provide students with a deeper understanding of language structures and functions, enhancing their interpretation skills. A strong theoretical foundation enables students to appreciate the nuances and complexities of both spoken and sign languages, improving their ability to interpret accurately and effectively. Additionally, this comprehensive understanding is crucial to meeting the demands of various interpretation contexts and enhancing the quality of translation services. A curriculum enriched with theoretical studies would also enable students to develop critical thinking and analytical skills, essential for identifying and solving complex translation challenges. This skill set is particularly important in professional settings, where interpreters must quickly adapt to new and varied communication scenarios. By understanding the theoretical underpinnings of language, students can better apply practical skills, making them more versatile and competitive in the job market.

Furthermore, an increased focus on linguistics would open avenues for students to engage in research, particularly in contrastive linguistics, which examines the differences and similarities between languages. This research is vital for understanding the unique aspects of sign language compared to spoken languages, contributing valuable insights to both academic and practical applications in language translation. Engaging in research equips students with critical skills and enhances the academic reputation of the programme, providing opportunities for innovative approaches to interpretation and translation methods.

The incorporation of Internet resources for uploading sign language content has been identified as a positive step towards more interactive learning experiences. However, this approach is more interactive than innovative. To enhance the technological dimension, the College could explore the use of AI-driven solutions for real-time sign language interpretation and learning aids.

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have led to the development of powerful sign language interpretation tools. Motion-sensing technologies, such as Microsoft's Kinect and Leap Motion, use depth-sensing capabilities to recognise and interpret sign language gestures in real time. Deep learning models, particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs), have been trained to improve the accuracy and speed of gesture recognition from video inputs. For example, Google's Teachable Machine allows users to train models for gesture recognition without needing extensive coding expertise. In addition, wearable technologies such as smart gloves, which are equipped with sensors to detect hand movements, can translate these gestures into text or speech. Smart glasses with augmented reality (AR) capabilities can also display sign language translations for hearing individuals, facilitating better communication in various settings.

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) offer immersive and interactive platforms for learning sign language and real-time translation. Virtual reality environments provide sign language learners with virtual practice scenarios using avatars in 3D settings, allowing for a more engaging and effective learning experience. AR applications can use smartphones to overlay sign language translations onto the real world, enhancing accessibility and making it easier for sign language users to communicate with hearing individuals in everyday situations.

Mobile applications are increasingly being used to make sign language more accessible and easier to learn. Apps such as HandTalk translate text and speech into sign language using a 3D interpreter, while Giphy's American Sign Language Stickers offer animated GIFs for American Sign Language (ASL) learning. Interactive learning apps such as The American Sign Language App and Marlee Signs provide video tutorials and interactive features to aid American Sign Language learners. By adopting

these technologies, SISA College can enhance its curriculum with AI-powered tools, immersive VR/AR environments, and mobile learning resources, improving both teaching and practical applications of sign language for its students.

While not all of these AI-driven technologies are directly applicable to Latvian, experimenting with them could provide valuable insights and drive innovation in sign language translation and interpretation. Exploring such technologies can help improve the capabilities of the existing programme, improve the accessibility and accuracy of translation, and foster a deeper understanding of spoken and sign languages. Embracing technological advancements can also open new avenues for international collaboration and research, positioning the programme at the forefront of linguistic innovation. The providers of these AI-driven language technologies usually provide a free academic licence to educational institutions.

Although SISA College has made commendable strides in addressing some of the previous recommendations, particularly in international collaboration and research involvement, more efforts are needed. Enhanced partnerships with academic institutions and the integration of cutting-edge technologies could propel the programme to new heights, fostering a robust academic environment conducive to both teaching and research. This would not only benefit students and faculty, but would also contribute to the broader field of sign language interpretation and linguistics.

When compared to similar programmes abroad, such as those in the UK (e. g. University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) BA programme British Sign Language and Deaf Studies, <https://www.uclan.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/british-sign-language-deaf-studies-ba>) or the US (e.g. Gallaudet University BA programme Interpretation (American Sign Language-English, <https://gallaudet.edu/interpretation-and-translation/>), which often include a more in-depth focus on linguistics and translatology theory, the “Sign Language Interpreter” programme could benefit from integrating more linguistic theory. This would provide a deeper understanding of the translation process and improve the robustness and relevance of the programme. Additionally, other programmes may offer more extensive practical components or specialised modules on cultural competency, which could be valuable additions to the current curriculum.

Expert panel highly suggests to integrate more courses in linguistic and translatology theory to deepen the understanding of the translator process and establish partnerships with international institutions to facilitate exchange programs and collaborative projects, enriching students' learning experiences.

By incorporating additional linguistic theory and expanding practical and cultural training, the study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” can further enhance its quality and relevance in the international context.

#### 2.2.2. Not applicable.

2.2.3. The SAR (p. 57) outlines that the study process at SISA College employs certain modern pedagogical methods and tries to integrate technology into the learning environment (SAR, p. 57). The study programme uses a variety of instructional techniques, including lectures, discussions, learning negotiations, Latvian spoken communication, situational analysis and project-based learning. These methods aim to create a dynamic and interactive learning experience that supports the programme’s objectives and enhances students’ competencies.

The college implements various study methods to foster independent learning, such as individual assignments, group work, and frontal teaching (SAR, p. 57). These approaches promote active engagement and encourage students to take responsibility for their learning journey. The assessment principles and examination systems detailed in the SAR (p. 58) are well structured and align with learning outcomes, ensuring that evaluations accurately reflect students' knowledge and

skills.

Student-centred learning is a core focus of the programme, as observed during the site visit on 24.07.2024, where students expressed satisfaction with the teaching methods and their relevance to real-world applications. The flexibility and effectiveness of these pedagogical strategies allow for adaptation to individual learning needs and foster a supportive environment that encourages exploration and critical thinking.

The study programme is conducted in Latvian, which supports the development of student proficiency in both spoken and sign language communication. However, there may be an opportunity to enhance students' linguistic competencies by incorporating additional language learning components, particularly English, to broaden their communication skills and increase their versatility in international contexts which is noted in the study programme learning outcome No. 2 indicating the English language as an option for interpreting.

Although the programme currently does not offer joint study opportunities or courses in foreign languages, the inclusion of distance learning components could be explored to further support student engagement and accommodate diverse learning preferences. Using digital platforms such as Moodle and E-klase facilitates the delivery of course content and provides students with access to a wide range of learning resources, allowing for a more flexible and personalised educational experience.

Overall, the study implementation methods are mostly designed to achieve the objectives and learning outcomes of the programme. By continuing to prioritise student-centred approaches and exploring opportunities for innovation and expansion, SISA College can further enhance the quality and impact of its educational offerings.

2.2.4. The SISA College has established strong connections and effective collaboration with the labour market and stakeholders, creating good opportunities for students to engage in practical learning and training. The College's internship programme is guided by a structured organisational procedure that outlines the responsibilities of the College, including those of the career support expert, the internship supervisor, and the on-site supervisor at the internship placement. The duration and timing of internships are clearly defined in the study plan (SAR, p. 59).

The internship programme is divided into two parts: training and qualification. The tasks associated with these internships are well defined and aligned with the learning outcomes (Annex No. 39 and 40). Students are required to prepare a comprehensive report that includes conclusions and proposals, and they must also maintain an internship diary electronically (SAR, pp. 59–60). The content of the training covers a variety of relevant topics, providing students with the opportunity to consolidate their theoretical and practical knowledge. This immersive experience enhances their understanding of the specific situations and nuances involved in sign language interpretation.

During a meeting with employers on 24 July 2024, an opportunity for improvement was identified. The head of the Latvian Association of the Deaf was accompanied by an interpreter, a graduate of the College, who faced some challenges in adhering to fundamental sign language interpreting protocols. For example, the interpreter positioned herself with her back to the experts, which inadvertently blocked the president's face during communication. This situation highlights the importance of enhancing core competency training and assessment to ensure our graduates are fully prepared for professional settings. With a bit more focus on these areas, the readiness and confidence of interpreters can be further strengthened.

In general, the internships offered by SISA College are effective and play a crucial role in strengthening the theoretical and practical competencies of the students. Tasks assigned during internships are directly related to learning outcomes and are achievable. While the programme demonstrates effectiveness, the College may benefit from incorporating additional training sessions or evaluations to ensure that students consistently meet professional standards in their practical

applications.

#### 2.2.5. Not applicable.

2.2.6. Students at SISA College typically select themes for their final theses that relate to their workplace or qualification internship experiences. These qualification theses focus on addressing real-world issues within the field of sign language interpreting, ensuring that students apply their learning to practical scenarios (SAR, p. 60). The SAR (pp. 60–61) highlights that the list of qualification thesis topics (Table 3.2) is both relevant to the field and aligned with the objectives of the study programme.

Research topics often involve data collection and analysis, which are crucial in developing solutions to the challenges faced by professionals in the field. Each topic is subjected to an approval process by the College's Research and Methodological Council, ensuring that the research is methodologically sound and pertinent to current industry trends.

By allowing students to focus on issues they encounter during their internships or at their workplaces, the College bridges the gap between academic learning and professional practice. This approach not only enhances student problem solving skills, but also contributes to the development of the field of sign language interpreting by addressing contemporary challenges and generating innovative solutions.

The relevance and applicability of the thesis topics demonstrate the commitment of the programme to producing graduates who are well prepared to make meaningful contributions to their professions. As the College continues to support research initiatives, it may also explore opportunities to encourage interdisciplinary topics and collaborations, further enriching the academic experience and expanding the impact of students' work.

### **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

#### Conclusions:

In general, the content of the study programme and courses is current and results-orientated. However, the sign language and translation courses would greatly benefit from the participation of linguists specialising in sign language linguistics, morphology, syntax, lexicology, and translation studies. Incorporating international advancements in these fields would further enhance the curriculum. Additionally, other courses should integrate topics related to Deaf culture and deafness to provide a more comprehensive understanding for students.

The teaching methods and internship opportunities are aligned with the objectives of the study programme, offering students practical and relevant experiences. Furthermore, the topics of the final theses of the students are appropriately aligned with the field, ensuring that their research is meaningful and applicable.

#### Strengths:

1. The qualification thesis topics are aligned with real world issues in sign language interpreting, bridging the gap between academic learning and professional practice.
2. The teaching approach is student-centred, focusing on flexibility and real world applications, which students have expressed satisfaction with.
3. The internships provide students with valuable practical experience.
4. The involvement of deaf lecturers in the programme adds authenticity and inclusivity to the learning environment.



#### Weaknesses:

1. The linguistic courses do not adequately reflect the latest scientific research and innovations, particularly in sign language studies, thus forming a gap in awareness of global advancements in sign language and translation studies.
2. Teaching staff in sign language and translation courses lack formal education in linguistics, posing a risk to the academic rigour and quality of the programme.
3. Key courses in phonology, grammar, and lexicology of Latvian sign language are missing from the curriculum, affecting the comprehensiveness of the programme.
4. The translation studies courses do not sufficiently cover the theoretical foundations necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the translation process.
5. Integrate more English interpretation practice into the curriculum to meet the stated learning outcome of the study programme.
6. The curriculum would benefit from a greater emphasis on theoretical frameworks in linguistics and translation studies. This enhancement would provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic intricacies involved in the interpretation of sign and spoken language.
7. There is potential for the programme to integrate more advanced technological solutions, such as AI-assisted sign language recognition tools, to enrich the learning experience and keep pace with global advancements in the field.

#### **Assessment of the requirement [5] (applicable only to master's or doctoral study programmes)**

- 1 R5 - The study programme for obtaining a master's or doctoral degree is based on the achievements and findings of the respective field of science or field of artistic creation.

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

not relevant

### **2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme**

#### **Analysis**

2.3.1. Taking into account the fact that the previously analysed study field has only one study programme, all the information contained in points 1.3.1.-1.3.8. also corresponds to the analysis of the study programme.

The distribution of funding for the study programme is based on the following costs: remuneration of academic and administrative staff, premises and material and technical support, indirect costs. Information on study costs is provided in Table 2.3.1. (SAR, p.27) and can be expressed as follows: 20% are indirect costs, 2% administration costs, 5% costs of the premises and materials, and 72% remuneration. Overall, it can be concluded that on average 77% of the costs are directly related to supporting the teaching process, and approximately 23% are indirect and administrative costs.

The library is equipped with learning resources for the programme. Library working hours are Monday, Wednesday, 11:00-17:30, Friday, 10:00-17:00, closed on Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays. As observed in the experts' visit, the learning process in the study programme at the college also takes place on Saturdays, so the management should evaluate the possibilities of providing library work on Saturdays as well.

Every year, the library's collection is updated with the latest available literature in Latvian, English, and German.

The College library has 130 books for the Sign Language Interpreter programme. As observed during the experts' visit, the College cooperates with the Latvian Association of the Deaf ('LAD'), and the

students in the study programme have access to digital and printed sign language teaching materials developed by LAD in the College library and online. The library's resources are renewed based on the demand of the teaching staff for the latest literature within the available funding for the study course. The quality management system includes the process diagram 'Enabling the work of the Jūrmala Vocational Secondary School and College library'. (SAR, Annex No. 29).

2.3.2. Not applicable.

2.3.3. Overall, the College as part of the Agency has a stable financial situation. The study programme is financed by the state budget. Financial resources are planned and monitored by the Agency's Finance Department in accordance with the planned number of state budget-funded study places in the College.

When planning funding for the study programme, the calculation is basically taken for 10 state-budget-funded study places. According to SAR (p.63) Table 2.3.1., the full-time study costs of the Sign Language Interpreter study programme amount to EUR 23,239.12. The cost per full-time student per year is EUR 2232.91. Taking into account the large dropout of students, College authorities should think about the efficient use of funds.

### **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by specifying strengths and weaknesses**

Conclusions:

The system of allocating funding for the study field and only study programme is appropriate to the current situation where the college is fully integrated in the Agency. The resources and provision of the study programme partially comply with the requirements for effective programme implementation. The library and computer classes are mainly well-equipped and approachable. Library working hours are not coordinated with study time on Saturdays. As observed in the experts' visit, the study process at the college also takes place on Saturdays, so the management should evaluate the possibilities of providing library work on Saturdays as well.

Strengths:

1. The College has a stable financial situation, with the study programme funded by the state budget, ensuring consistent support for the programme.
2. The College library is updated with relevant literature in multiple languages (Latvian, English, and German), trying to support the academic needs of the students and the academic staff.
3. Students have access to digital and printed sign language teaching materials developed by the Latvian Association of the Deaf, enhancing the learning experience.

Weaknesses:

1. The programme experiences a significant dropout rate, raising concerns about the efficient use of allocated funds and potentially indicating issues with student retention.
2. The programme is primarily financed by the state budget, which could pose risks if state funding were to be reduced or reallocated in the future.
3. Given the high dropout rate, there may be a need to reassess how financial resources are utilised to improve student retention and overall programme efficiency.
4. The library working hours are not coordinated with the study process.

### **Assessment of the requirement [6]**

- 1 R6 - Compliance of the study provision, science provision (if applicable), informative provision (including library), material and technical provision and financial provision with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

The resources and provision of the study programme partially comply with the requirements for effective programme implementation. The library and computer classes are well equipped and approachable, but library working hours should be coordinated with the study process.

## **2.4. Teaching Staff**

### **Analysis**

2.4.1. The SAR (p. 64) indicates that 17 lecturers are involved in the realisation of the study programme "Sign language interpreter", two of them having a doctor's degree, all the others have a master's degree or are industry practitioners. According to CVs' provided in Annex ST CV EN zip, it could be noted that the teachers with the doctoral degrees are representing another science field than the one under evaluation. It is undoubtedly an advantage to attract members of teaching staff with a doctoral degree to a study programme, but scientists representing translation, linguistics or other fields in Humanities might be very helpful in improving the scientific level of the study field "Translation". Despite the fact that official regulations do not require the employment of members of teaching staff with doctoral degrees in the same field as the conducted study programme, such steps might be very beneficial for the study field as well as the study programme. As stated in SAR (p.64) the qualifications of teaching staff involved in the study programme meet the requirements set out in the Law on Higher Education Institutions (Augstskolu likums, Article 26). However, as SAR (p. 32) states, internal regulations No. 1-6/23 'Regulations on Administrative and Academic Positions at the Social Integration State Agency College' (Annex No. 8) were developed and updated in 2017, setting the requirements for the qualification and professional development of teaching staff. Among these requirements in section III. Qualification requirements of academic positions it is stated (in points 14.2, 15.2, 16.2) that the applicant for a permanent position in the College must have publications relevant to the scientific field. Although the SAR (p. 32) indicates that 94% of academic staff work part-time, in order to strengthen the scientific part of the field and the study programme more members of teaching staff should be employed into permanent positions. Another challenging aspect of having such a high number of guest teachers presents a serious obstacle regarding the intention of a long-term engagement in study programme implementation and study field development.

The practical or applied part of the study programme is strong, with teachers participating and being members of the Sign Language Commission of the Latvian Association of the Deaf as well as members of the LNS Sign Language Interpreters Attestation Commission, which ensures the rapid integration of the most current information oriented towards the needs of industry and changes in the field into the content of the study programme. This was also partially confirmed during the on-site visit of the expert panel (meeting with teaching staff). Strong links with industry stakeholders were also repeatedly mentioned in the on-site meetings with employers, teaching staff, students, and graduates, which is a valuable practice to follow.

2.4.2. There is no information provided in SAR about the increase/ decrease of full-time teaching staff in the study programme during the period under evaluation. From the information provided (SAR, p. 32) it can be stated that 94% of teaching staff in the College are employed part-time. Employee turnover during the reporting period (2018-2023) fluctuates within the limits of 5% within

one study year, which can be considered as minor changes (SAR, p. 65) but taking into account that the majority of teaching staff are part-time employees, this presents a huge challenge for the development of study field and study programme. The study programme "Sign Language Interpreters" represents a narrow specialisation, and taking into account very good relations with the industry it is possible to continue to carry out the study programme as before but the lack of study field development and frangibility and insecurity of teaching staff should be considered as threats to be addressed.

#### 2.4.3. Not applicable.

2.4.4. SAR information on teaching staff shows that all teachers have more than five years of practical experience, which is in accordance with the Law on Higher Education Institutions. According to Annex No. 32 and 32.1 the scientific engagement of teaching staff results in the 24 presentations in conferences and publications in the period under evaluation as well as 20 participations in projects. Unfortunately, no detailed information was provided during the on-site visit or in the SAR. It is hard to assess what these numbers represent and how deep they correlate with the study field or the study programme under evaluation. The Annex No. 32 presents a list of publications in the form of article or abstract, but as was already mentioned in Section 1.4.1. a rather small number of them has a direct link to the study field under evaluation.

2.4.5. The small number of students and teaching staff allows effective cooperation during the study process which has been recognized in a number of meetings during the on-site visit. In the meeting with teaching staff and study programme management it was assured that cooperation is promoted by teaching experience exchange within the College and with other institutions of higher education from Latvia and abroad. Lecture observations are conducted on an annual basis as well as academic staff meetings, programme managers' meetings, Research and Methodological Council meetings, student and teaching staff meetings. The SAR (p.66) states that after finishing the course, students anonymously evaluate the course content, the methods used and the quality of teaching in the e-environment, but having in mind very low numbers of students in each course the responses might lack objectivity and comprehensive representation as it is difficult to assure anonymity.

The stronger cooperation with other national and international educational institutions might be beneficial for further development of the curricula of the study programme, joint scientific and/or applied research, and improving professional growth of teaching staff.

### **Conclusions on this set of criteria, by indicating strengths and weaknesses**

#### Conclusions:

The number of teachers employed in the study programme is sufficient to ensure the implementation of the study programme "Sign language interpreter", but almost all of the teaching staff members work part-time, which raises challenges and is not sustainable in the long term. Teachers participate in and are members of significant industry bodies such as the Sign Language Commission of the Latvian Association of the Deaf and the LNS Sign Language Interpreters Attestation Commission, ensuring that current field information on the labour market is integrated into the curriculum. There is an insufficient emphasis on research within the teaching staff of the "Sign Language Interpreter" study programme, and a lack of detailed mechanisms to support staff involvement in research activities. With 94% of teaching staff working part-time, there is a lack of long-term engagement and continuity in the study programme, which poses a threat to its

stability and development. The participation of staff with doctoral degrees is limited to fields outside the focus of the study programme. Recruitment of experts and especially scientists in translation, linguistics, or related humanities fields could significantly benefit the programme. Although recent funding allocations for research are a positive step, sustained financial support is needed to improve research activities and the overall quality of the study programme.

**Strengths:**

1. Strong connections with stakeholders from the industry.
2. Teaching staff successfully involve students in research by presenting their internship and qualification thesis findings at conferences, thus aligning their education with industry needs.

**Weaknesses:**

1. Low engagement of teaching staff in research activities.
2. Inconsistent international cooperation to enhance educational practices and broader perspectives.
3. Limited research focus among teaching staff.
4. Very high proportion of part-time staff.
5. Underutilization of doctoral expertise in the study field "Translation".

## **Assessment of the requirement [7]**

- 1 R7 - Compliance of the qualification of the academic staff and visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents, visiting lecturers and visiting assistants with the conditions for the implementation of the study programme and the requirements set out in the respective regulatory enactments.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The teaching staff employed in the study programme meets the formal requirements set out in Articles 39 and 40 of the Higher Education Law for the implementation of the study programme. Nevertheless, as SAR indicates (p. 32) 94% of teaching staff in the College are employed part-time. This is considered a critical drawback that results in low participation in research activities that are essential for the development of the study field and the study programme. Furthermore, as internal regulation No. 1-6/23 'Regulations on Administrative and Academic Positions at the Social Integration State Agency College' (Annex No. 8) sets the requirements for the qualification and professional development of teaching staff, where in the section III "Qualification requirements of academic positions" it is stated (in points 14.2, 15.2, 16.2) that the applicant for a permanent position in the College must have publications relevant to the scientific field. Thus, the teaching staff being employed full time could be beneficial and of critical importance for the development of the study programme and the study field under assessment.

## **2.5. Assessment of the Compliance**

### **Requirements**

- 1 1 - The study programme complies with the State Academic Education Standard or the Professional Higher Education Standard

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study programme "Sign Language Interpreter" complies with the State Education Standard No. 305, which outlines the "Regulations on the State Standard of Professional Higher

Education”.

- 2 2 - The study programme complies with a valid professional standard or the requirements for the professional qualification (if there is no professional standard required for the relevant occupation) provided if the completion of the study programme leads to a professional qualification (if applicable)

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” complies with the Professional Standard “Translation” Professional Qualification Requirements for a “Sign Language Interpreter””.

- 3 3 - The descriptions of the study courses and the study materials have been prepared in all languages in which the study programme is implemented, and they comply with the requirements set forth in Section 561 , Paragraph two and Section 562 , Paragraph two of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Course descriptions are available in both Latvian and English, in accordance with the requirements set forth by the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

- 4 4 - The sample of the diploma to be issued for the acquisition of the study programme complies with the procedure according to which state recognised documents of higher education are issued.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The diploma template awarded upon completion of the study programme follows the official procedure for issuing state-recognized higher education documents.

It should be noted that in the diploma there is a grammatical error (deviation between cases in Annex No. 2 and Diploma sample). In the sample the qualification is given in the nominative case, however, it should be in the genitive case according to the Annex No 2.

- 5 5 - The academic staff of the academic study programme complies with the requirements set forth in Section 55, Paragraph one, Clause 3 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

- 6 6 - Academic study programmes provided for less than 250 full-time students may be implemented and less than five professors and associated professors of the higher education institution may be involved in the implementation of the mandatory and limited elective part of these study programmes provided that the relevant opinion of the Council for Higher Education has been received in accordance with Section 55, Paragraph two of the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

- 7 7 - At least five teaching staff members with a doctoral degree are among the academic staff of an academic doctoral study programme, at least three of which are experts approved by the Latvian Science Council in the respective field of science. At least five teaching staff members with a doctoral degree are among the academic staff of a professional doctoral study programme in arts (if applicable).

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

- 8 8 - The teaching staff members involved in the implementation of the study programme are proficient in the official language in accordance with the regulations on the level of the official language knowledge and the procedures for testing official language proficiency for performing professional duties and office duties.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The academic staff has sufficient proficiency in the Latvian language to conduct study courses and manage professional and administrative duties. This is verified by a confirmation signed by the SISA Acting for the Head of Personnel and Document Management Unit, applicable to all staff involved in the implementation of the study field "Translation" (Annex Knowledge of the national language ST.docx).

- 9 9 - The teaching staff members to be involved in the implementation of the study programme have at least B2-level knowledge of a related foreign language, if the study programme or any part thereof is to be implemented in a foreign language (if applicable).

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

- 10 10 - The sample of the study agreement complies with the mandatory provisions to be included in the study agreement.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study agreement for SISA College's Sign Language Interpreter programme includes all essential components as outlined in Cabinet Regulations No. 70. The agreement template provides detailed information about SISA College, the student, and the study programme, along with the respective responsibilities and rights of both the College and the student. It also details the financial arrangements and specifies the terms for the duration and termination of the agreement. (Annex No. 22)

- 11 11 - The higher education institution / college has provided confirmation that students will be provided with opportunities to continue their education in another study programme or another higher education institution or college (agreement with another accredited higher education institution or college) if the implementation of the study programme is terminated.

**Assessment of compliance:** Partially compliant

According to clause 3.1.8. the study agreement (Annex 22), the Parties agree that in the event that the study programme is not accredited or re-accredited during the term of the Agreement, the College offers the Student the opportunity to continue their studies in another College study program or at another university.

However a document certifying that the university or college will provide students with opportunities to continue their education in another study program or at another university/college (agreement with another accredited university or college) if the implementation of the study program is terminated (Annex 20) states that SISA College is the only professional higher education institution in Latvia that implements the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter" with the awarded qualification – sign language interpreter at the expense of the state budget, therefore there is no possibility to secure studies at another university/college that offers the acquisition of such a qualification, if the study the implementation of the program will be stopped.

- 12 12 - The higher education institution / college has provided confirmation that students are guaranteed compensation for losses if the study programme is not accredited or the study programme's license is revoked due to the actions (actions or omissions) of the higher education institution or college and the student does not wish to continue studies in another study programme.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

Based on Annex No. 21 – a document certifying that the college guarantees compensation for losses to students if the study programme is not accredited due to the university or college's actions (activity or inaction) or the licence of the study programme is revoked and the student does not want to continue his studies in another study programme.

- 13 13 - The joint study programmes comply with the requirements prescribed in Section 55.(1), Paragraphs one, two, and seven of the Law on Higher Education Institutions (if applicable)

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

- 14 14 - Compliance with the requirements specified in other regulatory enactments that apply to the study programme being assessed (if applicable)

**Assessment of compliance:** Not relevant

### **Assessment of the requirement [8]**

- 1 R8 - Compliance of the study programme with the requirements set forth in the Law on Higher Education Institutions and other regulatory enactments.

**Assessment of compliance:** Fully compliant

The study programme “Sign language interpreter” complies with the requirements set forth in the Law on Higher Education Institutions.

It should be noted that in the diploma there is a grammatical error (deviation between cases in Annex No. 2 and Diploma sample). In the sample the qualification is given in the nominative case, however, it should be in the genitive case according to the Annex No. 2.

### **General conclusions about the study programme, indicating the most important strengths and weaknesses of the study programme**

The study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” at SISA College stands out as a pioneering and crucial initiative in Latvia's higher education landscape. Its unique focus on equipping students with specialised skills for interpreting between Latvian Sign Language and spoken languages addresses a significant gap in the local market. This programme plays a vital role in fostering inclusivity and accessibility for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities within the country.

The programme is the first of its kind in Latvia, specifically designed to meet the needs of a niche market. Its relevance is underscored by the growing demand for qualified sign language interpreters in various sectors, including education, healthcare, and public services. The curriculum is closely aligned with the needs of the labour market, as evidenced by employer surveys that indicate that graduates possess the skills and competencies required in the field. This alignment is crucial for ensuring high employability rates for graduates. The programme benefits from a team of highly motivated and dedicated teachers who are committed to student success. Their enthusiasm is reflected in the positive feedback from students and graduates alike. The programme covers a range of subjects, including specialised courses in sign language, interpreting techniques, and professional ethics. Continuous collaboration with employers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders ensures that the programme remains relevant and up-to-date with industry trends and



needs.

Nevertheless, as it was mentioned, the curriculum would benefit from a greater emphasis on theoretical frameworks in linguistics and translation studies to provide students with a deeper understanding of language systems and enhance their analytical skills. The programme faces challenges with student retention, particularly due to the difficulties in balancing studies with work and personal commitments, as well as the demanding nature of the coursework. While the programme is unique, there is room for improvement in terms of research output and the integration of innovative technologies such as AI in sign language interpretation. Despite some progress in establishing partnerships, there is potential to expand international collaborations further, especially with institutions that focus on translation and linguistics.

The study programme “Sign Language Interpreter” at SISA College generally meets the necessary requirements for accreditation. It demonstrates strong alignment with market needs and societal demands, ensuring that graduates are prepared for employment in their chosen field.

However, certain areas require attention and improvement to maximise the potential and impact of the programme. Integration of more robust theoretical components and a focus on research can be addressed within the two-year accreditation period. This enhancement would enrich the academic rigour of the programme. Expanding the programme's delivery options to include part-time and more distance learning formats would increase accessibility and cater to a wider range of students, particularly working professionals. Exploring and implementing innovative technologies and pedagogical approaches can enhance the learning experience and maintain the competitive edge of the programme.

The programme may continue its implementation in its current format. However, expanding to additional delivery methods and enhancing international collaboration are recommended to further strengthen the programme. These improvements would ensure that the programme remains adaptable and responsive to evolving educational and market demands.

In conclusion, the “Sign Language Interpreter” programme at SISA College has a solid foundation and clear strengths that can be leveraged for continued success. Addressing the identified weaknesses and expanding the delivery options will ensure the sustainability and relevance of the programme in the future.

**Evaluation of the study programme "Sign Language Interpreter"**

Evaluation of the study programme:

Average

**2.6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Sign Language Interpreter"**

**Short-term recommendations**

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Integrate more courses focused on linguistic and translation theory within the curriculum. This would provide students with a deeper understanding of the translation process and overall competence as interpreters.                                                                                          |
| 2. Add key courses such as grammar and lexicology of Latvian sign language to the curriculum. This would fill the current gaps and provide students with a comprehensive understanding of both sign and spoken languages.                                                                                         |
| 3. Incorporate technological innovations by adopting AI tools that allow experimenting with AI-driven solutions, such as motion-sensing technologies or mobile applications, to enhance sign language interpretation training. This could provide a more interactive and modern learning experience for students. |

4. Introduce part-time or online courses to accommodate students who struggle to balance full-time studies with work and personal commitments. This could help reduce dropout rates and make the programme more accessible.
5. Research and Methodological Council should take a more active lead in defining research subfields under the framework of study field "Translation".
6. Expand and strengthen international collaborations on the frameworks of Erasmus+, NordPlus and similar.
7. Aim to employ more full-time teaching staff to ensure long-term commitment and stability in the study programme "Sign language interpreter".

### Long-term recommendations

1. Form strategic partnerships with national and international universities that have strong linguistics and translation studies programmes. This could facilitate knowledge exchange, research collaboration, and potentially enhance the curriculum.
3. Develop detailed processes and support structures to facilitate and encourage research activities among teaching staff, thus encouraging academic staff to engage in research by collaborating with larger academic institutions. This would broaden the scope of research activities and contribute to the preservation and development of Latvian sign language.
3. Focus on recruiting academic staff with formal education in linguistics and translation to ensure the programme's academic rigour. This is particularly important for advancing research and preserving the Latvian sign language.
4. Develop mechanisms for sustaining financial support to maintain and enhance research activities and educational resources.

## III - Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field and the Relevant Study Programmes

### III - Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field and the Relevant Study Programmes

#### Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field

Requirements	Requirement Evaluation	Comment
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Requirements	Requirement Evaluation		Comment
R1 - Pursuant to Section 5, Paragraph 2.1 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions, the higher education institution/ college shall ensure continuous improvement, development, and efficient performance of the study field whilst implementing its internal quality assurance system:		Partially compliant	The quality management system is designed to promote ongoing improvement and effective performance of the study field, but a major concern is the lack of objectivity due to the small number of individuals involved in the process of evaluation. Additionally, while staff qualifications are verified internally, there is a shortage of academic staff with linguistic background.
R2 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the level of development of scientific research and artistic creation (if applicable)		Partially compliant	The current status in scientific and/or applied research lacks a strategic approach including financial resources (local and third parties' funding), international /institutional cooperation as well as academic staff engagement.
R3 - The cooperation implemented within the study field with various Latvian and foreign organizations ensures the achievement of the aims of the study field.		Partially compliant	Lately, the College started to cooperate with institutions in Latvia but the cooperation with foreign ones still should be established. It was one of the recommendations in the previous assessment and yet, has not been taken into account.
R4 - Elimination of deficiencies and shortcomings identified in the previous assessment of the study field, if any, or implementation of the recommendations provided.		Partially compliant	The recommendations received in the previous assessment could be considered partially implemented, as only during past years some actions have been taken from the College part to try to establish international cooperation. As for the recommendation of involving all academic staff into research, it is not implemented to the full and the present expert panel strongly believes that deeper engagement of the academic staff in scientific activities is highly recommended for the further development of the field under assessment.

#### Assessment of the Requirements for the Relevant Study Programmes of the Study Field

<b>No.</b>	<b>Study programme</b>	<b>R5</b>	<b>R6</b>	<b>R7</b>	<b>R8</b>	<b>Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)</b>
1	Sign Language Interpreter (41227)	Not relevant	Partially compliant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Average

### **The Dissenting Opinions of the Experts**

There are no dissenting opinions of the experts.