

Expert group joint opinion

Evaluation Procedure: Assessment of Study Field

Higher Education Institution: Academy of Luther

Study field: Religion and Theology

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

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The Luther Academy (LA) in Riga has a specific position in contemporary Latvian history. It was established in 1997 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia. According to the SAR the LA took over the tradition from the Seminar in Theology, which was established in 1969 until 1991.

On this background the LA comes out of the new Latvian independence, continuing specific seminary processes during the Soviet time. The LA, however, also functions as the main provider of ministers and pastors to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL.) The synod and leadership do not accept women ordination. For that reason and other confessional reasons the ELCL does not accept candidates from the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia as pastors in the ELCL.

This makes the LA context a specific case and explains why there is such a strong ecclesial presence in the leading LA positions and in the different entities in the LA management system.

The expert group had an interesting and well-organized site visit at LA October 18-19, 2023. Experts assess LA as a well-run Higher education institution (HEI). The management system, the organization and quality of the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" are on a good level. The teaching staff seems to be dedicated to their jobs and to follow up students, both in the classes and individually. The digital platforms and the video recordings of each class are good and impressive.

The expert group also had some short impressions of the non-accredited Open Academy, which LA runs in addition to the accredited academic bachelor study programme "Theology". This other program does not belong to the mandate of the expert group. Experts will, however, recommend that LA works for ways of integrating these two programs. It is of great value and importance to develop teaching contexts where international students can participate on an active level, even if their participation is mainly digital.

There is no doubt about a continued accreditation for the LA academic bachelor study programme "Theology". The concrete recommendations for the quality development for the study field as well as for the study programme are inserted in 1.7 and 2.6.

The expert group will, however, make some comments on the structure of the LA in the present situation of higher theological education in Latvia. The size of LA and the number of students in the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" is low. The teaching staff is very occupied with classes and lacks time and opportunities to develop articles registered in international databases and there is also an urgent need to develop stronger internationally based research projects.

In addition to this, the expert group has observed the explicit strong confessional profile of the LA. Four bishops in the ELCL have leading roles in the management of the LA. The curriculum in many courses mirrors confessional positions and students are admitted due to a test in Lutheran catechism in addition to normal gradings.

The expert group recognizes that the LA founder (the ECLL) together with its Missouri Synod partners are in full right to shape their institution as they prefer. To have theological institutions with a diversity of research and study profiles is also of positive significance for national and international theological competence.

From an academic point of view, there are also challenges when a confessional profile becomes too dominant. The urgent need for academic freedom of speech and expression can lose strength. This again might have consequences for the quality of both teaching and research in an institution. The expert group favors a stronger cooperation between the LA and a broader network of universities. This will reduce the challenges regarding size in LA. A stronger exchange in teaching and research will also gain the academic quality of the LA. From a position of Lutheran theology, academic quality is better provided when confessions and church leadership are not part of a HEI.

I - Assessment of the Study Field

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1.1 Management of the Study Field

Analysis

1.1.1. The name of this study field is "Religion and Theology" (study field). This field has a Development Plan (DP) approved by the LA Senate in August 2021 (Annex 3- Pielikums Nr.3_ Studiju virziena attistibas plans.pdf). Within this study field there is an academic bachelor study programme "Theology", which was accredited in 2012.

The aim of the study field is formulated in the SAR like this: "to provide students with an opportunity to obtain existentially consistent spiritual reference points and values in the dynamic environment of today's society" (SAR 2.1.) Within this general aim, the SAR distinguishes four concrete aims, which all belong to the goals of the study field as a whole: Biblical theology, History, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology (SAR 2.1.). These four aims correspond to what the international field theology will call disciplines. What is characteristic for all four aims at LA is that they all are defined with relation to Lutheran, Christian and ecclesial contents. In this way the four "aims" are more closely connected to current confessional, Lutheran positions than what is common in other international presentations of theological disciplines. From the inner logic of LA self interpretation, one might, however, say that the four aims are clearly defined.

This is why one can also say that the aims of the study field comply with the main directions of the LA. The main direction of LA as a HEI is presented in SAR 1: "LA is a higher education institution...with a purpose to prepare clergy and lay persons for ministry in the field of spiritual care and education in the ELCL congregations and state, municipal, and non-governmental institutions". In this way LA as a HEI presents itself as a church-oriented institution. Annex 23 is an overview of the Compulsory, Limited Elective and Free Elective courses in the study programme. There are 15 Compulsory, 15 Limited Elective courses and 5 Free Elective courses. The title and content of all 15 compulsory courses are inner theological. Typical names are "Overview of the Bible", "Lutheran Confession", "Prophets" etc. SAR 2.1.1., nevertheless presents this general ecclesial profile to also contribute to Latvian societal needs:

The aims of the LA study field are linked to the vision defined in the Latvian Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 (<https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/191187> - only in Latvian) that in 2030 the society in Latvia will be such as to consume responsibly, be creative, open, ready to cooperate, especially favourable towards children and elderly people.

The position of the aims of the study field and strategic and operative management of implementation of these aims is in line with the key strategic principles of the national sustainability development:

creative activity;
tolerance;
cooperation;
participation;
excellence

On this background one must conclude that LA claims that the dominant aim of providing to ecclesial needs also, and parallel, is a contribution to Latvian society. It is, however, a risk, that the dominant ecclesial focus takes too much attention in the programme and reduces the societal outlook and competence building in the study field and in the study programme. UThe expert group thinks this is a risk to be seriously reflected by the LA in the next accreditation period.

There are, however, also courses (e.g., "Introduction to Diaconia" and different courses in "Pastoral Care") in the study programme, which are more explicitly oriented to society. In these courses students learn more on how to relate to persons in difficult and marginalized contexts. During

interviews in the assessment visit with graduates, it was mentioned how such skills were very important when working in societal areas like health care and prison.

1.1.2. Annex 2 (Pielikums Nr.2_SVID.pdf) contains the SWOT analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the study field, based on a 2022 analysis. The SWOT analysis is a very good and honest presentation of both strengths and especially weaknesses. Among the most significant weaknesses are a too small number of staff with a PhD, the small number of students, no internationally based research project. The Development Plan (DP) (Annex 3- Pielikums Nr.3_Studiju virziena attistibas plans.pdf) uses the analysis in the SWOT document to develop a strategy for the years 2021-2025 for the challenges listed in the SWOT and to locate the responsibility in the HEI of implementing better practices in LA to overcome the weaknesses.

1.1.3. Annex 4 (Pielikums Nr.4_Studiju virziena parvaldiba_shema.pdf) shows the structure of the study field management. It is a rather top down model with the Vice-Rector for Studies on the top. This position leads the Head of the Study Field, who again leads the Programme director. In this way there is a strong relation between the leadership of the study field and the more hands-on leadership of the academic bachelor study programme "Theology".

The question is whether this model gives enough space for the development of the study field. From the model in Annex 4 (Pielikums Nr.4_Studiju virziena parvaldiba_shema.pdf) the teaching staff is not directly involved in the development of the study field. They are, however, indirectly involved through the Methodological Commission (document approved by the LA Senate 19.12.2017 - SAR 2.1.3.). It seems, however, that the mandate of this commission primary is to review the different study process, student papers, etc. On this background, there might be an implicit conflict between the top down model for leading the study field and the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" involved, and the more bottom up input from the teachers involved in the courses. Academic development develops first of all from those scholars, who are involved in relevant research practices on the one hand and giving courses in the same context on the other hand. On this background the LA would benefit from a model where inputs and influence on course and programme development is more oriented in the direction of academic relevant competence. Apart from this reflection, there seems to be good processes for decision-making. The model in Annex 4 gives a good documentation of this. The assessment visit also confirmed that there are good procedures for decision making in the study field/academic bachelor study programme "Theology".

Regarding the support provided by the administrative and technical staff, there is not much documentation in the SAR and in the relevant annexes. During the assessment visit, however, the impression was that the different LA bodies and committees had good administrative support. There is a competent librarian and IT competent staff as well.

1.1.4. The SAR gives good documentation of the LA system for admission of students, recognition of the study period, professional experience, prior formal and non-formal education and assessment of students' (previous) achievements. Characteristic of the admission procedure is that it takes place individually, that the students have to write an essay on their motivation to study at the LA and that there is a content related test before the student is enrolled in the academic bachelor study programme "Theology". It is not obvious whether there are also specific requirements for the level of grading the students are supposed to have.

The link (https://ej.uz/arpus_form_izgl) gives details on how professional practice, prior and non-formal education will be assessed in the admission system of the LA. The procedures follow Latvian regulations. The final decision, however, is taken by a LA commission. This commission has the mandate to regulate how all previous practices as well as courses taken in other study programmes will be accepted as sufficient. The main principle for accepting courses is that there are parallel

courses with the academic bachelor study programme "Theology".

It is not obvious whether the stakeholders are informed about this system. The stakeholders, however, especially the ECLB, is stronger represented in most management levels in the LA than in most other parallel HEI: Because of that, there are good reasons to conclude that the stakeholders are well informed about these regulations. A more formal system to secure this, might be an advantage for the future.

1.1.5.

SAR (2.1.5) gives a good overview over methods, principles and procedures for students` assessing achievements. The models for all this are presented to all new students in the beginning of their studies. In this way students know the different ways examination and evaluation will take place during the academic bachelor study programme "Theology". Organization of examinations and evaluation of student achievements takes place in accordance with the Luther Academy's "Regulations on Examinations" (decision of the Senate No. 8, 29.08.2017) (https://ej.uz/LA_regulat_on_examin).

In the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" assessment is not only something, which takes place at the end of each course. There are different ways of assessment also during the course, depending on the content and the profile of each course. The interim evaluations (within the course) counts 50% and the final examination counts at least 10%

Teaching staff and professors systematically discuss and evaluate the evaluation and examination methods in order to increase quality. In the end of the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" all students have to submit a "research paper" (SAR 2.1.5.) The students can choose the topic for a Bachelor paper themselves (and thus also their research methods), or the scientific supervisor may assist in the choice (The Luther Academy's Regulations on Examinations; decision of the Senate No 8, 29.08.2017, https://ej.uz/LA_regulat_on_examin).

The relevance of assessment methods for the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" as a whole depends on whether the aims of the study programme and the assessment principles, methods and procedures are congruent or not. The aims of the study programme are presented in SAR 1.1.: "The aim of the study field "Religion and Theology" is to provide students with an opportunity to obtain existentially consistent spiritual reference points and values in the dynamic environment of today's society."

In SAR 1.1.1. one also reads: "Therefore, the LA study field "Religion and Theology" provides the academic foundations in the key theological areas:

Biblical theology - to be able to explain the Biblical texts within the framework of the Lutheran hermeneutics to indicate the spiritual origins of biblically rooted human values;

History - to identify the constant role of the LELB in development of the cultural and national self-awareness of Latvians while learning of the Church history and role of Lutheranism in it;

Systematic theology - to formulate the apostolic Christian faith based in the Holy Scriptures, acknowledged in ecumenical creeds, and explained in Lutheran creeds to provide spiritual reference points in current environment and society;

Practical theology - to acquire ecclesiastical competences to operate in the Church ministry and be involved in the current social processes with an appropriate understanding and confidence."

With these four areas LA claims to contribute to the overall political aims for the Latvian society also formulated in SAR 1.1.1.: "creative activity;

tolerance;

cooperation;

participation;

excellence

The challenging question is whether these high ambitions for the study field are addressed in its

total ambition in the assessment methods and models at LA. In the above analysis to 2.1.1. this is already commented. It has to do with the tension between ecclesial and academic ambitions for the LA as a whole. One might say that critical thinking and independent positions are values of decisive importance in an academic context. If these ideals should be implemented for the assessment process at LA, one might have wanted to see explicit procedures for how this kind of competence is assessed and evaluated. From the position of Lutheran technology, however, critical thinking is not something to avoid. On the contrary, one could very well argue that a stronger foot on critical thinking and independence, might be in accordance with Lutheran traditions. In Western Europe, many strong state universities (e.g., Copenhagen, Berlin, Uppsala and many others) have faculties of theologies in the Lutheran tradition. These faculties favor critical thinking and independence more positively than what is the case in LA

1.1.6. SAR 2.1.6. states: "To control plagiarism, the LA uses the unified digital plagiarism control system. In the beginning of 2023, the LA signed an agreement on joining the Unified Digital Plagiarism Control System. Currently, based on the cooperation agreement, the system is used by seven higher education institutions of Latvia - Daugavpils University, Liepāja University, University of Life Sciences and Technologies of Latvia, Riga Stradiņš University, Rēzekne Academy of Technologies, EKA University of Applied Sciences, as well as RISEBA University of Applied Sciences". Plagiarism for intermediate assessments aren't checked.

The plagiarism system assesses the final student papers, probably the papers called research papers. There are rules for what defines plagiarism. Students convicted for plagiarism are excluded from the academic bachelor study programme "Theology", but can be accepted again and submit a completely different paper after a certain period of exclusion (SAR 2.1.6).

There are no reports in the SAR that stakeholders are explicitly involved and informed about the plagiarism processes. Implicitly one might, however, say that since the stakeholders and the leadership of the LA are one and the same, stakeholders are informed in this informal way.

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

The aims of the study field are clearly defined and attainable. The study field and the relevant study programmes comply with the main directions of the strategic development of the HEI. The interconnection of the study programmes in the study field is clear and logical. The SWOT analysis is good and transparent and is well integrated into development planning documents. The management structure of the study field and the corresponding study programmes is oriented towards the development of the study field and decision making and administrative support seem to be in good order. There is, however, a challenge of a rather top-down management system. And the ecclesial presence in the management system is too dominant. There is a good system and procedures for admission of students, for the recognition of the study period. Professional experience, prior formal and non-formal education are well defined and work in a good way. There are good methods, principles and procedures for assessing the achievements of students.

Strengths:

1. The management system is professional and transparent.
2. There are good systems for the recruitment and acceptance of new students.
3. Assessment of students' achievements and learning outcomes are well defined.

Weaknesses:

1. The management system is mostly top down.
2. A too strong ecclesial dominance in the leading roles in the management system.
3. Critical thinking and independence are not explicitly aspects of assessment processes.

1.2. Efficiency of the Internal Quality Assurance System

Analysis

1.2.1. LA has developed a quality assurance system based on Total Quality Management principles. LA implements EFQM (European Foundation of Quality Management) methodology, which ensures a continuous improvement, development and operational effectiveness of the study field and academy. Unfortunately at the time of the evaluation, LA has a publicly available quality policy document, and during the assessment visit all of the participants presented some knowledge of the principles used in their internal quality management system. It could be considered a weakness, that LA has quality policy, is difficult to be located on their webpage under Regulatory Documents section. It is advised to somehow put more emphasis on their policies and have easier access to them than currently (lutraakademija.lv -> About Us -> Regulatory Documents). LA could consider to establish a separate section dedicated to policies or add it under "Values and Vision". Nevertheless, in SAR p.37 and p. 38 LA clearly defines their Quality Management System's compliance with ESG standards and guidelines.

One of the main quality assurance mechanisms is provided by continuous feedback from students, graduates and employers. The LA uses activities to monitor and improve the quality of studies and research such as:

1. analysis of quantitative and qualitative indicators of student learning, scientific and creative activities;
2. identification (questionnaire survey) and analysis of student satisfaction;
3. identification (questionnaire survey) and analysis of graduate satisfaction;
4. summarizing and analyzing of opinions expressed by employers and cooperation partners;
5. identification and monitoring of the quality of academic staff (annual work interviews; results of student questionnaires; analysis of quantitative and qualitative indicators of scientific and creative activity);
6. regular self-evaluation of the study field and the programme.

Additionally LA performs an evaluation of quantitative and qualitative indicators of student learning, scientific and creative activity, including: analysis of student performance, drop-out risks, achievements in the research activity, and other aspects (SAR p. 34).

Quality management system is managed by the LA Deputy Rector, Director of the study field and study programme in cooperation with representatives from Student Council, employers and other partners.

An important role is also played by LA Convents - Convent of Graduates provides advice and suggestions for programme development and Convent of Advisors consists of various partners and supporters of LA` and provides further analysis of LA strategy and gives advice on further strategic development. The point of having a separate convent of graduates is a bit unclear, therefore LA should provide a clear emphasis of the necessity for this additional structure.

It should be mentioned here as well the fact that there are no clear regulations on how LA chooses and elects and evaluates academic staff as well as guest lecturers. It would be wise to develop Academic personnel policy and to describe the criteria of academic staff selection, as well as selection of guest lecturers. This regulation should be available on the LA website publicly.

Overall LA quality management system is well developed, but it lacks transparency in terms of being publicly available. Stakeholders practice both formal and informal feedback procedures and LA has a good stakeholder understanding of QMS; however a lot of it is dependent on a 1 on 1 approach, since the small number of students and staff allow to uphold regular personal engagement.

1.2.2. According to the SAR (pages 39-43) LA academic bachelor study programme "Theology" development must be in compliance with the LA Development Strategy 2021-2025 (https://ej.uz/la_developm_strategy). LA has created internal regulatory documents which describe

the procedures of developing and reviewing relevant study programmes of LA (https://ej.uz/regulat_study_field_programm) and acquiring feedback (e.g. lecture observations (https://ej.uz/la_hospit_protok_1_dala and https://ej.uz/la_hospit_protok_2_dala). For lecture observations there is responsible a methodological council and every course has at least an observation organized once in every one or two years.

Each year, the LA prepares self-evaluation reports of the study field and academic bachelor study programme "Theology" to reflect implementation of the programme, novelties, changes to the programme, and the improvement process; evaluation of the stakeholders – both the results of student surveys and evaluation of employers.

Regarding review of the academic bachelor study programme "Theology"- each year teaching staff responsible for their relevant study courses need to revise the content and adjust it to the feedback received from students and graduates and other involved parties. Academic bachelor study programme "Theology" director later ensures study course content and attainable goal and objective correspondence with the study programme. During the planning process of self-evaluation and development of new study programmes, the responsibility at the LA is distributed between the Director of study programme, Head of the study field, the Study Department, as well as the Senate. It should also be noted here, that LA at the time of the evaluation is considering changing the academic bachelor study programme to professional and in order to do so, a work to create/renew professional standards has been ongoing. A professional standard and concept of the potential programme was developed. The development process of the programme was collegial; all partners were involved in all stages based on equality principles. Currently, introduction of the professional bachelor study programme "Theology" has been suspended because the professional standard has not been approved; however, when analyzing resources and opportunities, as well as the demand on the labor market, the LA still supports the necessity of this professional bachelor study programme "Theology".

Due to the small number of students and a small community, LA practices both formal and informal (and anonymous, if necessary) procedures regarding giving feedback and how the feedback is processed in LA. Students give feedback after every course in the CANVAS management system (it is obligatory). Students also give feedback once per semester by a survey, which covers both satisfaction with study courses and resources (including CANVAS platform). During the meeting with the students it was observed that the possible student complaints or suggestions are taken well into account.

However, Deming's cycle's end phase - what has been done about the feedback - can be improved, for example, in case of student feedback by publishing general survey statistics on webpage and later being transparent about the steps taken to fix any issues or improve processes. Another possibility is to encourage staff to mention to students at the beginning of the study course the improvements to that study course since the previous implementation.

1.2.3. As mentioned previously, LA accepts both formal and informal student feedback. Statistics on informal feedback are not being recorded. As mentioned in SAR (pages 43-44), to ensure the quality of the study process, the LA has developed and implemented "Rules of Proposals and Claims by Students of the Luther Academy" (Decision of the Senate No 3, 02.04.2019, https://ej.uz/propos_claims_by_students). The procedures define:

1. the form how students can individually or in groups submit suggestions or complaints in writing,
2. procedures for registration and evaluation of complaints.

As written in SAR, suggestions and complaints about the study process can be submitted to the Programme Director, Vice Rector for Studies, or the Deputy Rector. Replies to suggestions and complaints are usually provided within 5 business days. If additional information is necessary, the student is informed on extension of the period with a provided reasoning for it. At the end of the academic year, the Programme Director submits a report to the LA management for the received

complaints and decisions made to eliminate the complaints.

LA has a devoted Chaplain that works as a consultant for students about academic issues and personal issues that they might encounter during their studies. They also get involved in issues as a mediator. As written in SAR (page 44): During the period from 2017 until 2022, one written complaint was submitted on LA or its teaching staff. The student expressed insights from her subjective experience and a reasonable remark on the teacher's work. The complaint was submitted to the Student Council, and its representative informed the LA Senate. Afterwards, the LA chaplain heard out the student personally and provided answers to her. Talks were held with the teacher as well. There have been verbal complaints; in one case the teacher of the course was replaced, and in another – participation was organized in further education courses on didactics of the teaching level at a higher education institution.

From one perspective - it is definitely an unusual practice to involve a Chaplain specifically devoted to guide students in their studies and to hear their academic and personal issues, but it is good to involve a neutral, third party, that can work as a mediator in any tough situations given the fact that there are not many people. There is a risk that a lot of the potential issues that are resolved informally are not recorded anywhere, as a result the same issues could concur again, but it seems that LA currently has a good balance over the potential risks currently.

The LA also has the Academic Arbitration Court which provides an opportunity to address (appeal) any rules related to studies, incl. control over compliance with evaluation principles etc. During the reporting period, the students have not used the aid of the Academic Arbitration Court to settle disputes.

While the mechanisms are there and students are informed about the possibilities to submit feedback, sometimes they are not informed about the impact of their opinion and it would be useful to further strengthen the feedback loop from the LA side.

1.2.4. According to SAR (pages 44-46) LA regularly analyzes the dynamics of the number of students. It is done twice per year: in autumn and in spring to understand their demographic data, applicant and admitted student count and student performance. LA also analyzes data on interim evaluations and final evaluations of the study courses, final results of the final examinations once per semester. The data on performance of the study programme in general, the academic debts of students (per semester, in credit points) are also summarized and presented in LA decision-making bodies as well.

To acquire the necessary feedback LA implements a verbal survey for applicants (with a purpose to receive information for improvement of quality of measures of student recruitment), an electronic survey once per semester (to find out the opinion students hold on the content and forms of study courses, the quality of work performed by the teaching staff, and the quality of study environment), verbal discussion with students that terminate studies or wish to do so (to analyze and reduce drop out risks), graduate survey (to analyze the full picture of the programme and whether it reaches necessary goals and outcomes as needed) and employer survey (usually verbal when employers participate in different LA decision making bodies. It would be wise to reach out to a wider potential employer audience via more formal feedback options (especially when LA will formally implement studies in English as well). LA also gathers information on the employment of their graduates.

It should be mentioned here, that the student feedback is obligatory after every course. Such a decision would be debatable in larger institutions as there would be doubt on the truthfulness of the data, but given the small number of students and their motivation to study, it is also clear that they understand the necessity for an honest opinion and their influence to change things.

Additionally, the information submitted in the E-platform also has statistics from their non-accredited "Open Academy" course, which involves remote teaching with students from different countries around the world. It was a bit difficult to analyze at first, but it was valuable to understand the full capacity of LA capabilities.

The mechanism for obtaining and providing feedback, including from students, graduates and employers, is effective and focused on the improvement of the study field.

1.2.5. The information published on LA web pages <https://www.luteraakademija.lv/> corresponds with the information provided in AIKA the e-platform. Academic bachelor study programme "Theology" accreditation date, length, acquirable degree and type of study and form as well as the amount of credit points correspond with the information mentioned in E-platform. Since the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" currently is only implemented in Latvian, all of the necessary information provided in Latvian is also fully correct. In future, LA could also describe on the website the planned changes for their study programmes (e.g. that LA is currently undergoing re-accreditation, that the programme could have an applicable professional standard and students could also learn in English etc.) that way students and potential applicants are aware of the future development of LA which might affect their studies in the future.

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

LA has developed a good internal quality assurance system and it is effective in many ways. The Quality policy is publicly available, but could be better accessible on the website (currently its a bit difficult to find it). According to the assessment visit, the management seems also willing to further improve the system. The students have several channels, for example the CANVAS, student council etc., to give feedback on their studies and the stakeholders can give feedback by a survey or via discussion. The feedback is taken into account, but the information about the improvements should be also more transparent. The data acquired within the system and procedures are mainly sufficient for systematic analysis of the study programmes and stakeholder approval and general satisfaction of the quality and other factors. The process for study programme renewal and new programme development ensures goals alignment with LA strategy and includes stakeholder feedback. The web pages have basic information about the programme, However some information about the current and future development are missing.

Strengths:

1. Small community allows personal engagement with each student and staff, therefore it is easier to gather and discuss information regarding quality of studies etc.
2. The feedback mechanisms are provided systematically.

Weaknesses:

1. Quality policy is difficult to find on the LA website.
2. The closing of Demings cycle (PDCA-cycle) could be improved, not all students or stakeholders know how and if their feedback has been taken into account.
3. No clear academic personnel policy and criteria of academic staff selection, as well as selection of guest lecturers.

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

LA has established regular internal quality assurance procedures, and regular feedback systems for continuous development. The discussions during the assessment visit also evidenced that the LA is aware and willing to develop the quality continuously. The main weakness of the Inner

Quality Assurance System of LA, realized by the experts, is the lack of publicly available Quality Policy and Academic personnel policy and regulations on academic staff evaluation and guest lecturer attraction. The power structures between the many collegial bodies remain somewhat hidden, which increases the likelihood for development of an so called “informal organization”. The transparency of power structures, especially of economic and recruiting powers, should be enhanced. The core process descriptions are missing and should be created for transparency reasons.

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

Assessment of compliance: Partially compliant

LA have established procedures, however the policy is missing and it is not publicly available on their website

- 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: Fully compliant

LA has developed a clear procedure for the development and internal approval of the study programmes which is well explained in the SAR. The name of the regulation is “Nolikums par studiju virzienu un studiju programmu atvēršanu un pārvaldību”

- 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

LA has developed procedures for evaluation and preparation of final thesis and unified study regulations which provide reassurance that students achieve the intended learning outcomes of the academic bachelor study programme “Theology”.

- 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

Currently LA has rules on lecture observations (hospitācijas) however, it would be wise to develop Academic personnel policy and to publicly describe the criteria of academic staff selection, as well as selection of guest lecturers. Additionally LA provides plenty of regular opportunities for staff to develop their didactics and teaching skills by participating in either partner organized seminars abroad or seminars organized by other universities in Latvia.

- 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

LA ensures that different types of data are collected systematically by the Study Department

and Programme director. Analysis of said collected data is organized by the Study department, study programme director and analysis is discussed throughout different councils/convents and Senate. The student statistics were a bit difficult to interpret reliably, because they were mixed with data from Open Academy which was not evaluated in this procedure.

- 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

LA ensures continuous development in their daily work and management is willing to develop the quality continuously.

1.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Field

Analysis

1.3.1. The LA system to determine and distribute financial provisions for the study field and its Academic bachelor study programme "Theology" is based on the Law on Higher Education Institutions (<https://likumi.lv/ta/id/37967-augstskolu-likums>), providing that higher education institutions are funded by the founders.

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL) as LA establisher/founder (SAR chapter 1.1. p.4.) provides the financial resources necessary for continuous operation of the LA.

LA takes into consideration the Cabinet Regulation No. 445 of 05.07.2016 "Regulations Regarding Remuneration of Teachers" (<https://likumi.lv/ta/id/283667>), as well as other external laws and regulations.

According to the SAR (chapter 2.3.1. p.52.) most of the LA financial resources are used to organize the study process. The main costs related to implementation of study processes include remuneration of the academic staff governed by the Regulations on Workload of Academic Staff at the Luther Academy (Decision of the Senate meeting No 12, 21.11.2017, https://ej.uz/LA_workload_academic_staff).

The most significant financial support to the LA is provided by the ELCL partnering church in the USA, LCMS (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod); a part of the financial resources is formed by the student tuition fees governed by the Regulations on General Procedures for Study Fees and Granting Discounts for Study Fees at the Luther Academy (Decision of the Senate No 8., 25.10.2018, https://ej.uz/regulat_tuition_fees).

For research, the LA budget allocated 4.8 per cent of total expenditure in 2022, including research projects, the publication of LA scientific articles, the organization of conferences, participation of academic staff in international conferences, and the replenishment of library resources.

LA teaching staff is supported by the institution to continue their formal (Ph.D.) education. There is support to organize and attend conferences.

The amount of the tuition fee for each academic year is determined for the Senate. The tuition fee at the LA has not changed since 2018. (SAR chapter 2.3.1. p.53.)

LA publishes scientific articles` magazine "CREDIMUS".

<http://lutraakademija.lv/?ct=aktualitates&fu=read&id=51>

In the particular moment "CREDIMUS" value is not very high, because the magazine is not available in world recognized databases.

Considering all aspects of HEI's financial situation (income - study fee, support from ELCL and LCMS; expenses - salaries for administration and teaching staff) all parts need to consider that without support (not state) HEI cannot manage many LA activities. Up to this point finances are managed effectively.

1.3.2. The total area of premises intended for provision of the study process is 415 square meters in Riga, Alksnāja iela 3, Riga. (SAR point 2.3.2. p.54.)

According to the number of students and the specification of the LA, the lecture rooms can be used by 12 to 24 people. All lecture rooms are equipped with the magnetic (white) board, stationary or portable projectors. Each lecture room has a computer; desks and chairs can be rearranged as needed to meet the requirements of studies. All premises are equipped with a free access Internet connection, access to e-learning environment, e-mail. If necessary, video conferences may also be organized in the lecture rooms.

Close to classrooms - there is available a special room where every day Christian services led by LA students take place.

To preserve the history and heritage of the LA, lecture rooms are named after famous LELB pastors, Professors of the LU Faculty of Theology and LELB Seminar of Theology, e.g., Memorial Room of E. Rumba; Lecture Room of R. Feldmanis; lecture room of R. Akmentiņš, P. Žibeiks; the rooms are decorated with the interior items and informational material reflecting the most significant events in the life and ministry of these LA and LELB people. (SAR point 2.3.2. p.54.)

The LA building is suitable for persons with disabilities (in wheelchairs).

In the library with a reading room it is possible to work on current and final papers and do research in comfortable and high-quality conditions.

If a student wants to take time for individual studies during the day (lectures happen at evenings) he/she can speak with administration about using classrooms.

There is no need for a special computer class, because students use their own laptops in their studies. LA mentioned during the assessment visit that they used to have a computer class, but it was not used because students preferred to use their own devices.

All lectures are filmed, recorded and that makes up not just an information base, but it also can help in situations if there would be misunderstanding regarding study topics.

After every study course students have the opportunity to evaluate it and give their opinion for improvement.

Students, employees and teaching staff of the LA have access also to a kitchen where they can cook or heat up the food they have brought with them.

Material and technical provisions and availability thereof to students and teaching staff at the LA can be evaluated as fully appropriate for the needs of Academic bachelor study programme "Theology".

1.3.3. According to SAR chapter 2.3.3. p.55. the library of the LA was founded in 1998.

Activities of the LA Library are governed by the Regulations of the Library at the Luther Academy (https://ej.uz/LA_regulat_library, decision of the Senate meeting No. 9 , 19.09.2017)

The library acquires new books not only by the decision of a librarian, but also by suggestions of the teaching staff, administration or students.

According to "Regulations of the Library at the Luther Academy" 3.2. "The Library Council is composed of the Vice-Rector for Studies, the librarian, heads of study directions, 2 representatives of academic staff of the relevant study programme, and 1 representative of the Student Council."

LA Library has one of the largest collections of theological literature in Latvia.

In December 2022, the users of the LA Library had access to 27,408 units of printed information resources in Latvian, English, German, and Russian for implementation of the study field "Religion and Theology". Most resources - 27.52% are in English; 15.89% in Latvian; 25.08% in German; 8.75% in Russian; and 22.76% in other languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, etc.). (SAR point 2.3.3. p.58.)

As of 2020, the LA purchases 25 subscriptions each year and offers the LA teaching staff and students the option to use Logos Bible Software (www.logos.com) which is a large-scale electronic library (in English) for studies in theology.

The use of world's recognized data bases and tools helps to acquire and use the newest resources.

LA Library is certified and included in the Ministry of Culture library registry and everyone has the option to order materials from other libraries and collect them at the LA library.

1.3.4. The lecturer may organise the online consultations via MS Teams, Zoom, Skype, Whatsapp applications, electronic mail, or other technological options, and the lecturer will agree on this with a student in advance.

As seen during the assessment visit, LA uses CANVAS which has been made to suit needs and is very effective. (SAR point 2.3.4. p.59.). CANVAS is a similar system to MOODLE which is used in other universities. CANVAS platform has all of the course lists and study schedule. All of the content of study courses is available via CANVAS system, as well as grading criteria, intermediate assessments and final assessments and other materials. LA offers introductory seminars to staff and of course explains CANVAS platform to students on the very first days of studies. All of the assessments grading happens through the CANVAS system and students can see their grades digitally. The data regarding student satisfaction of CANVAS platform is also being collected and analyzed from every study course.

1.3.5. LA has announced (December 2022) a competition for 2 positions of academic staff: Assistant Professor in the sub-field of Church history, and a Lecturer in the sub-field of systematic theology LA regulations "Regulations on Academic Staff" (https://ej.uz/LA_regulat_on_acad_staff, (decision of the Senate No 12, 21.11.2017.) provide for Professor and Associate Professor, but so far (in 6 years) in LA still there is not elected one Professor or Associate Professor.

It seems that there is a lack of systematic approach to attracting qualified teaching staff and guest staff. LA is missing an united approach in this question, it would be beneficial to develop a strategy of staff attraction. Currently it seems that LA staff either invites other guest lecturers from their personal contacts or from church (LA leadership/founder) contacts.

Requirements for a Professor and Associate Professor are mentioned in:

Republic of Latvia Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 129 (Adopted 25 February 2021) "Procedures for Evaluating the Scientific and Teaching Qualifications or Results of Artistic Creation Work of an Applicant for the Position of Professor or Associate Professor and of a Professor or Associate Professor Holding the Position" (<https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/321300>).

According to the SAR 2.3.5. p.61. Competitions for the elected academic positions are openly announced. Information on the competition, incl. job assignments of the position, is published on the LA website (<http://lutraakademija.lv/en/?ct=vak>), as well as in the official gazette "Latvijas Vēstnesis".

1.3.6. Based on the information provided in the SAR (2.3.6.), it can be concluded that the LA has taken significant steps to determine the needs of professional and didactic development of the teaching staff, implementing appropriate improvement measures, and evaluating the results and effectiveness of the implemented measures.

Firstly, the LA has established a personnel management system based on performance to ensure competitive and motivating remuneration for staff. This system is designed to encourage continuous professional development and improvement. The LA has also developed regulations and guidelines to ensure the academic staff's qualifications and competence.

To determine the needs of the teaching staff, the LA conducts surveys and individual interviews. These efforts help in identifying the areas where professional development is required. The surveys and interviews enable the institution to understand the specific needs of the teaching staff in the context of higher education trends, innovations, and digitalization.

After analyzing the needs, the LA develops a comprehensive offer of professional development courses. The courses cover a wide range of topics, including student-centered learning and teaching in higher education, quality assessment systems, organization and management of an advanced

study process, creation of courses in CANVAS, and utilization of Logos Bible Software. The seminars and webinars organized by the institution also address accreditation of higher education institutions, evaluation of study fields, and guidelines for quality evaluation.

The participation in these professional development programs is voluntary, but the management provides recommendations to encourage the teaching staff to participate. This approach ensures that the faculty members have the opportunity to enhance their skills and knowledge in areas relevant to their roles and responsibilities.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented measures, the LA conducts surveys of the participants and evaluates the results after each program. This feedback mechanism helps in assessing the impact of the professional development courses and seminars on the teaching staff's competence and performance.

Furthermore, the participation of the management in seminars and courses promotes the integration of best practices in the LA management system and enhances the understanding of quality assurance standards in higher education. The institution also focuses on the implementation of changes and the promotion of strategic partnerships to create a robust ecosystem for higher education.

LA proactively identifies the professional and didactic development needs of the teaching staff, implements appropriate improvement measures through a diverse range of professional development programs, and evaluates the effectiveness of these measures through surveys and evaluations. This approach ensures that the teaching staff has access to continuous learning opportunities and enables the institution to enhance its research capacity, offer lifelong learning, and attract more foreign students.

1.3.7. According to the SAR (2.3.7), it mentions that the teaching staff at the LA consists of academic staff, visiting teaching staff, and guest teachers. The proportional distribution of teaching staff involved in the Academic bachelor study programme "Theology" is shown in SAR 2.3.7. Figure 12 (The proportional distribution of teaching staff involved in the programme, 2017-2022.) and Figure 13 (The proportional distribution of teaching staff involved in the programme). Figure 13 indicates that the average ratio of academic staff to visiting teaching staff is 35% and 65%, respectively, to ensure the content of studies. This distribution is typical for small higher education institutions in Latvia, especially in programmes representing humanities and with diverse study courses.

The SAR also mentions that the academic staff at the LA includes 2 Assistant Professors who work full time and 4 who have taken on a part-time workload. It is mentioned that most of the academic staff are actively involved in promoting Christian values in society and preservation of Lutheran traditions while working with pastors, chaplains, Church musicians, and Sunday school teachers. This additional involvement in ministry creates added value to the study process and integrates the experience of the teaching staff in the theory and practice at a local and international level.

During the assessment visit, it was mentioned that LA strictly defines academic, research and administrative workload in staff agreements.

Based on the information provided in the SAR, it is difficult to determine the exact balance of the academic, research, and administrative workload of the teaching staff at the LA. However, during the assessment visit, experts gathered information and have no doubts that the workload of the teaching staff is balanced.

1.3.8. According to the given SAR 2.3.8., the LA has identified the necessary support for students and has established a functioning support system to meet the needs of students. The SAR mentions several types of support available to students, including academic support, psychological support, and career support. Additionally, the Student Council plays an active role in supporting students and representing their interests.

The LA provides academic support to students throughout their study period, offering information and consultations on various aspects of the study process. This includes support for applicants and first-year students regarding the Academic bachelor study programme “Theology”, course selection, study documents, and learning skills (reading of scientific literature; selection of information; active listening; time planning; use of ICT resources, etc).

Psychological support is also provided to help students address personal and learning-related problems that may arise during their studies (interpersonal problems; conflicts; emotional difficulties; pre-examination stress, etc).

Career support is offered to help students identify their interests, abilities, and skills, and make informed decisions about education and profession throughout their lives. Support to career development is provided by the staff of the LA Study Department in cooperation with partnering institutions (LELB, etc.). The career support is expressed in individual consultation of the students, providing opportunities to practice in the LELB, social and other institutions, offering motivation camps, recollections, professional learning of German in Germany, liturgical ministry practice in Latvia and Germany, professional skills events, etc.

The Student Council plays a crucial role in supporting students by facilitating their participation in events, identifying their needs and interests, representing their interests in negotiations, and providing opinions on matters relevant to their rights, obligations, and interests.

The LA has taken steps to ensure effective communication and timely transfer of information to students. They have created a special email for communication with each group of students and utilize WhatsApp groups for information exchange and problem-solving.

The LA also conducts regular surveys to gather feedback from students, and the results show high satisfaction with the support received (Annex No 8 “Results of the Student, Graduate, and Employer Surveys).

The LA has demonstrated its commitment to identifying the necessary support for students and establishing a functioning support system to meet their needs. The support system includes academic, psychological, and career support, as well as representation and consultation through the Student Council. The LA has also implemented effective communication channels to facilitate information exchange and problem-solving.

According to the assessment visit discussions with LA chaplain and management, the provision of support also includes the opportunity to meet a chaplain as a consultant and leader in the academic life of students, as well as in the spiritual aspect of their overall growth

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

LA primarily relies on financial support from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (ELCL) and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) in the USA to fund its study field and Academic bachelor study programme in Theology. Student tuition fees also contribute to the LA's financial resources. The LA effectively manages its finances with the support it receives.

The LA premises in Riga, Latvia are well-suited for the study process, with lecture rooms equipped with necessary resources. The building is accessible to persons with disabilities, and there is a library with a significant collection of theological literature. The LA's material and technical provisions are considered appropriate for the needs of the study.

The LA utilizes various technological options for online consultations between lecturers and students, such as MS Teams, Zoom, Skype, and electronic mail. The institution has implemented the CANVAS platform to manage course content, grading, and assessments, providing students with easy access to course materials and assessment results. The use of technology in teaching and assessment is well-integrated into the LA's study process.

The LA has announced a competition for academic staff positions and has regulations in place for the evaluation of scientific and teaching qualifications. However, as of now, the LA has not elected

any Professors or Associate Professors. The institution should consider developing a strategy to attract qualified teaching staff and guest lecturers.

The LA has taken significant steps to determine the needs of professional and didactic development of the teaching staff and has implemented improvement measures accordingly. The institution offers a comprehensive range of professional development courses and seminars and conducts surveys and interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented measures. The LA also focuses on integrating best practices and strategic partnerships to enhance the quality of education and research.

The LA has established a functioning support system to meet the needs of students, providing academic, psychological, and career support throughout their study period. The Student Council plays an active role in supporting students, and the LA ensures effective communication and timely transfer of information to students through various channels. Regular surveys indicate high satisfaction with the support received by students at the LA.

Strengths:

1. The ELCL is the founder of the LA and shows a very strong interest in the future of the institution
2. The LA has a very large library with specifics in theological topics.

Weaknesses:

1. There are more guest teaching staff than elected/regular staff.
2. So far "CREDIMUS" is not in any internationally recognized databases.
3. LA consists of Assistant Professors and Lectures, but there is no one elected in assoc. professor or professor position. 3 of LA staff members are assistant professors (docents).

1.4. Scientific Research and Artistic Creation

Analysis

1.4.1. Directions of research Concerning the strategic aim, it is said in SAR 1.4.1: "The strategic aim of the LA scientific research is to ensure and develop high-quality scientific and applied research in accordance with requirements of laws and regulations of the Republic of Latvia and based on the relevant ELCL (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia) documents - ELCL Constitution (<http://www.lalb.lv/lv/?ct=satversme> - only in Latvian), ELCL mission (http://www.lalb.lv/lv/?ct=par_lalb - only in Latvian), ELCL Rules on Pastoral Ministry (http://www.lalb.lv/lv/?ct=noteikumi_instrukcijas - only in Latvian) and other documents expressing the needs of ministry in the ELCL, as well as based on current trends in theology and religion which apply to the involvement of the Church in society. The LA implements this research aim by involving the teaching staff, students, local and international cooperation partners.

In accordance with the regulatory documents binding to the teaching and ministry of the ELCL, it has stipulated that for the LA doctrinally binding shall be teaching in accordance with the Old and New Testament scriptures of the Bible and its interpretation in the collection of Lutheran creeds Liber Concordiae. The ELCL management has also stated that the ELCL has historically been an important formative element of the Latvian nation and its cultural environment, and that the challenge for the Church today is to continue being a force that forms the society."

However, it is not clear from this document what is meant with research based on the ELCL documents and what is meant with teaching according to the Scriptures and the Liber Concordiae. It did not get clear during the assessment visit either.

On the operational aims, it is said: "In accordance with Article 4.1.5. of the ELCL Rules on Pastoral Ministry (http://www.lalb.lv/lv/?ct=noteikumi_instrukcijas - only in Latvian), the LELB management has stipulated that a pastor should have acquired theological and practical education which is

necessary to fulfill the pastoral position and has been recognised by the ELCL.

Accordingly, the LA has defined its operational aims:

to prepare clergy and laypeople for ministry in the area of spiritual care and education in ELCL congregations and in State, municipal, and non-governmental institutions;

to provide academic and practical education for the students specifically in the area of theology specializing in the tradition of Lutheran theology in its historical and systematic exposition;

to develop the science of theology in Latvia;

to promote spiritual recovery of society; to preserve and create the necessary spiritual and intellectual potential for Latvia, and to promote its development.”

This is relevant, clear and understandable, only the expressions “spiritual recovery” and “spiritual potential” remain unclear.

Concerning the research fields, it is said in the SAR:

“Considering the causal links of development in theology and religion science and theological guidelines of the ELCL, the LA has specified the following research fields for the study field “Theology and Religion”:

general history and the history of Church in Latvia,

systematic theology,

Biblical and exegetical theology,

practical theology.”

It is continued: “These research fields have been derived from the relevant areas of theology and describe the role of each area in theology and religion research:

the general Church history with the special role of Lutheran faith in it assists in seeing the role of the Church as preserver of spiritual values globally in the Western and general global civilization and locally as continuous role of the LELB in development of the Christian faith, culture and national self-awareness of the Latvian nation;

systematic theology formulates in a structured way a unified view on prophetic and apostolic insights of the Holy Scriptures which are acknowledged in the ecumenical creeds, explained in the Lutheran creeds, and established in rationally fixed dogmas, and provide spiritual reference points for today’s environment and society;

Biblical and exegetical theology explains the Biblical texts pointing towards the Biblical spiritual origins of the general human values;

practical theology provides specific ecclesiastical competences to operate in the Church ministry and be involved in the current social processes with an appropriate understanding and confidence.”

It is clear that the research fields and their “roles” are rather strongly grounded by the ecclesiastical motivations. There are, however, also society etc. based reasons for the chosen research field:

“The scientific and applied research fields of the LA are also based on LA strategy, which is formed in line with the “Framework for Scientific, Technological Development and Innovation for 2021-2027” (<https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/media/3679/download> - only in Latvian), respecting the aims of the document:

a) to promote development of intelligent, technologically developed and innovative society in Latvia, with a special focus on promoting research excellence and increase in social value,

b) to develop the culture of open science by ensuring availability and use of research data and results in society,

c) the necessary preconditions should be created in the context of the global trends and national development priorities – human capital, knowledge, skills, and competences while using the advanced technologies to ensure acquisition of high-quality education and skills,

d) to increase the influence of the higher education and research system in Latvia, creating the added value in a way which is enriching in social, technological, economical, and cultural areas by promoting development of healthy, open, technologically developed, socially inclusive, and

nationally responsible society.”

It is continued:

“The research aim of the LA in line with the LA development strategy is obtaining the results of scientific research, support and further improvement of the scientific activity in the study process, and solving relevant tasks by using research methods.

For the period until 2025, the LA has specified its strategic research field as the Lutheran theological anthropology in the context of current events.

The LA research complies with and maintains correspondence to the previous readiness level of researchers (choice of topic; research methods, communication, etc.). The LA increasingly focuses on research internationalisation, striving for research excellence, involvement of society and educating society with an aim to promote development of an intelligent society of Latvia based on Christian values, which is technologically developed and spiritually enriched.”

What is said above is rationally understandable; only the expressions “based on Christian values” and “spiritually enriched” would need more explanation.

Estimation:

The directions of scientific research are properly described, although some expressions remain unclear, as indicated above. The research areas are in line with the development goals (annex 3: Pielikums Nr.3_Studiju virziena attistibas plans.pdf) and relevant for the study field and for the church needs as well as for certain needs in society. The church needs are clearly more met.

1.4.2. In the SAR 1.4.2., it is said:

“The LA places a special focus on linking the results of the scientific research with the study process. The research results become an integral part of this process, and provide a new incentive for development of new research ideas. Most part of research at the LA is conducted in relation to the content included in the study programme.”

First, it is given “examples of the best practice in use of the research results in the study process” by mentioning some papers [of the students?] and the courses in which they were used. Besides, it mentioned two book-translations made by the students of the LA which can be used in the studies.

Later it is said in SAR that “LA teaching staff implement a research-based study approach by regularly using the results of their research and the most significant fragments of publications in hand-out materials intended for students and in the exposition of the study content”.

It is also remarked that “Results of the link between the research and studies are reflected in the scientific conferences, seminars of foreign and local visiting lectors, and in other activities described in more detail in Chapters 2.4.4 and 2.4.5” and referred to a Pauls Žibeiks conference in 2020 and a publication by G. Kalme which is used as a resource in bachelor theses.

In the Assessment of the study programme it is said that “Mostly lectures are ... based on research” (2.2.3.). This is quite strongly said, unless it is meant by “research” research generally, not the research carried out in the LA. In the Assessment of the study programme it is also said that “The [students’] research often results as a report in a scientific conference or an article in a collection of scientific article.” (2.2.3.) During the assessment visit, it was said this is the case with the best papers.

It is obvious that the LA is very eager to develop its research in many ways (Research development plan, Annex 4: Pielikums Nr.4_Zinatniskas_petniecibas plans 2022_2023.pdf). The factual research areas and the research volume with staff, publications and projects (Annex No13_List of the publications of the teaching staff.pdf) are, however, limited in the LA and therefore their offering to the study field is limited. Some key areas of theology are researched, and such a research has a connection to the studies in various levels. The little presence of religious pedagogy research is regrettable when it is spoken of the pedagogical development of the studies.

1.4.3. The LA has got several international cooperation directions both in research and in study field:

Gothenburg: It is said in the SAR 2.4.3.: “During the reporting period, a significant role was held by development and strengthening of cooperation with the Lutheran School of Theology, Gothenburg... to promote exchange of teaching staff and students, participation in conferences, joint seminars and researches. The LELB and the LA regularly recommend the LA graduates to continue studies in the Master Studies of the Lutheran School of Theology, Gothenburg, to obtain a STM (Master of Sacred Theology) degree, so that they would be prepared for activity of a LA teacher or LELB theologian.” It is mentioned that after graduating from the School at Gothenburg in the reporting period, some former LA students have been working as teachers at the LA.

Concerning the research cooperation with the School at Gothenburg, it is exemplified that “Teaching staff of the Lutheran School of Theology, Gothenburg, were involved in the research project organized by the LA on meaning and topicality of the 500th anniversary of Reformation; the results of the research were presented on 26-27 May 2017, at the conference “Lutheran Reformation: Heritage of the Past; Current Challenges”.

American Missouri Synod: In the SAR 2.4.3. :

“Cooperation with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, USA, consisting of 10 universities and 2 theological seminaries with which the LA actively cooperates has been created for enhancement of the international research thought, research internationalisation, and attraction of financing to science”.

It also mentions some degrees received in the seminaries concerned.

About visiting lectures, it is mentioned in the SAR 2.4.3. that “During the reporting period, visiting lectures by foreign scientists have been an integral part of the study process promoting formation and exchange of scientific thought not only among the academic staff, but also students”.

According to the table (4), during the period 2017-2022, there were 1-4 foreign visiting lecturers per year. The longer lecture series given by them started at the end of the year 2019. It is not said whether (some of) the lectures were organized online (probably at least those in the most difficult pandemic years).

Concerning international cooperation, it is also mentioned that the academic staff has participated in international conferences with their reports. 11 conference visits have been named (Baltic cities, Berlin). It seems that at least almost all of the conferences were scientific ones.

One visit is especially seen significant: “The visit of the LA teaching staff and management with the Theological Seminary of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELB) organised in December 12-13, 2022, during which various types and opportunities of cooperation were discussed, had a significant and important role in improving international cooperations and internationalisation processes.” The participants decided, e.g., to organize an international ecumenic conference led by the LA, RARZI (Latvia), ELC Theological Seminary (Estonia).

Organisations: In the SAR it is also noted that members of the LA staff are active in the international organisations. (Some of the organizations mentioned are not scientific (e.g., Lutheran Word Federation), and the staff member does not represent the LA but the LELB in them.)

Finally it is said concerning the new internationalization:

“When planning activity in internationalisation of the scientific research, the LA set the additional new fields of activity:

Involvement of students and academic staff in Erasmus+.

Strengthening cooperation with the Theological Institute of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and Westfield House Theological Seminary of the Lutheran Church of England by creating common research projects and promoting common scientific publications in internationally quoted publications.”

During the assessment visit, the academic staff seemed to be eager to develop much wider international cooperation, also with the bigger universities. Such a cooperation is not sufficient yet. A confessional-based network is too narrow.

During the assessment visit, it became clear that the English involvement in the LA is convincing,

and there already are some international students in the LA. As far as the language is concerned, there is readiness in the LA for wide international cooperation both in research and in study field. The LA maintains international research and study cooperation, but mainly with a very narrow scale of faculties or seminars. The partners do not seem to be chosen according to the best expertise on the research or education field but by the (conservative) ecclesiastical profile of the institution. This is a risk for both research and study. With a more open attitude there would be much more chances to international research projects, joint publications, student exchange etc.

1.4.4. In order to promote the LA academic staff's active involvement in scientific research, "the LA has developed the support mechanisms to motivate the teaching staff, e.g., scientific research and its results are defined as one of the most significant criteria in the annual evaluation of the academic staff and determination of their remuneration; the participation of the academic staff in conferences is paid for, publishing of their publications is supported, etc." (SAR 1.4.4.)

The research situation during the evaluated period is as follows:

Projects:

The Day of Church History in Latvia (with reports presented), the Rumba-project (with a compilation-research book), the Reformation-project (with an ecumenical conference and a work of Knopkens). (Also a study course on homiletics is mentioned in this connection, although it is not clear why.) It is not clear whether any of the projects is strictly scientific. Rather they seem to be scientific-ecclesiastical.

Conferences:

It is said that "Results of the scientific and applied research conducted by the academic staff are regularly presented in conferences organised by the LA", and then mentioned four conferences (2017: 1, 2018: 1, 2020:2). Most of these seem to have been scientific conferences.

Concerning the improvement of the publishing it is told:

"To promote improvement of quantitative and qualitative indicator of the scientific capacity of the LA academic staff, the LA scientific journal *Credimus* is being published since 2022." Its editorial board includes international scholars. The journal "begins a new academic publicity stage of the LA by becoming an annual publication which creates the intellectual face of the LELB". A scientific journal is most welcome in order to improve publishing of research. Its role as creating the intellectual face of the LELB (and perhaps its name "We believe") is arising questions. Is it understood to be a journal of the church? What does it perhaps mean if it is at the same time scientific and of the church? This question is linked with the larger question of the identity and self-understanding of the LA.

Organizing conferences:

It is said that "LA teaching staff and researchers actively participate in organisational commissions of conferences", and given two examples. It is also said (in quite a complicated way) that "Participation of the LA academic staff in development and promotion of theology has a significant role in public discussions when preparing popular scientific and homiletic publications on topics relevant for the society", and it is given five examples.

Contributions to the applied research:

The LA participated in the project "Sustainable Development of the Cultural and Historical Centre of Rubene" (2015-2020) in which it, among others, partnered to create a series of educational conversation and meeting events.

Raising public awareness and expressing an expert opinion:

"Raising public awareness and expressing an expert opinion also have a significant role", the SAR says and gives G. Kalme's reports in chaplain conferences and the LELB Archbishop and the LA Rector J. Vanags's speeches as examples. In this connection, it is remarked that in 2018, the LA Rector Archbishop J. Vanags received a Certificate of Honour from the Minister of Defence A.

Bergmanis, and in 2022, he was elected the honorary member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences for his achievements in development of theology as science. It is also mentioned that Dr. Juris Rubenis has been an expert of the Council of Science of Latvia in the field of theology since 1997. This does not seem to be the case.

Editing books

“LA teaching staff contribute to research when editing books”, and as examples, it is mentioned five books for which Dr. G. Kalme was “a theological editor”.

Other

Memberships in some academic and societal commissions and councils are mentioned, and so are even some medals and awards.

Estimation

It is not clear whether there have been any strictly scientific projects in LA. The amount/list of scientific publications (monographs and articles) is tolerable, but the level of the publications remains partly open, it is not, e.g., said whether some of the publications are peer-reviewed. The need to enhance publication in indexed journals is not recognized in the SAR 2.4.4., but it was on display during the assessment visit. This critical point is mentioned also in the SWOT-analysis.

Some of the projects, conferences and publications seem to be partly scientific, partly ecclesiastical or spiritual.

In principle, it is important for the impact of research in society and the research itself that researchers have participated in many kinds of ecclesiastical and societal occasions. These occupations should not, however, risk the scientific character of the research and teaching.

The LA encourages its staff to do scientific research by defining it as “one of the most significant criteria in the annual evaluation of the academic staff and determination of their remuneration” and by paying the participation of the academic staff in conferences and supporting their publications. These are good measures and may help individuals in their research. Also the starting of the journal “Credimus” helps publishing research. These mechanisms are to some extent effective, but more increase for the amount and quality of the projects and publications might be found if the scientific cooperation were widened to a larger scale of universities and partners, both in Latvia and internationally.

1.4.5. In the SAR (2.4.5.) it is said:

“Research activities of the LA students are governed by the LA Rules for Development, Defence, and Assessment of Study Research Papers (https://ej.uz/LA_rules_study_research, decision of Senate No 1, 30.01.2018.). The students should write the following research papers:

Scientific report;

Study paper;

Bachelor paper.”

It comes out that the study research paper has to be, among other things, “relevant to the needs of the Lutheran Church”. The Methodological Commission of the LA defines this (answer from the LA).

Financing students’ research:

“The LA has developed internal regulatory documents defining the procedures for financing the research activity of students (Rules on Financing the Scientific and Research Activities of the Students of the Luther Academy), https://ej.uz/LA_financ_research, decision of Senate No 7, 24.08.2018.):

The annual planned volume of financing for quality support measures in scientific and research activities of the students is calculated in the budget of the LA by determining up to EUR 200.00 annually per one student.

Financing for quality support measures in scientific and research activities of the students may be used:

to cover the student’s business trip costs, including participation fee in scientific conferences and

seminars if the student participates with a report/poster in a scientific conference or seminar in Latvia or abroad;

to cover the costs for publishing a scientific article.”

It is also said in the SAR that “During the reporting period, financial recognition was shown to” three LA students.

In addition to the financing mentioned above, a student may get financing through a competition:

“Each year, the LA announces also the competition of scientific papers of students and provides to the winners one-off premiums of EUR 200,00 (1st place), EUR 100,00 (2nd place), and EUR 50,00 (3rd place) (https://ej.uz/LA_financ_research).”

Some students have even received foreign scholarships making it possible to take part in research (the SAR).

In the SAR, it is also referred to the financing from the Foundation of Professor Roberts Feldmanis (PRFF) and the Lutheran Heritage Foundation (LMF) to the students for translations and other publications.

Students’ research

Students’ translations and other scientific publications were mentioned already when dealing with the financing of the research. Besides preparing publications, some students have been involved in organizing conferences and giving reports in them. The students are introduced into the research also through “Small Research Academies”:

“A high added value the LA would wish to develop is the so-called LA “Small Research Academies” which are non-formal formations with the main task of promoting the scientific interest of students on certain topics and studies on these topics in cooperation with the scientific supervisors...”

These “Academies” “unite representatives of the LA academic staff, researchers, and students who are interested in ... research topics and are motivated to be involved in research and publication of results (reports at conferences; scientific articles in a LA collection of articles; international and local publications, etc.), as well as the practical implementation (pastoral counselling; recollections; etc.). Such activities aid in implementation of research-based student-centred studies, promote development of research competences, and long-term increase in the scientific capacity of the LA.”

Estimation:

In the LA, preparing research papers already belong to the bachelor studies. In the SAR, it is paid considerable attention to the financial support of students’ research activities. The amounts of money may be reduced, but the attention to this important factor is praiseworthy. “Small Research Academies” is an interesting innovation. So there are functioning mechanisms to promote the involvement of the students in scientific research. The students’ involvement in projects, conferences and publications would increase when such activities would increase in the LA, which would be possible through broadening national and international scientific cooperation, as has been suggested before.

1.4.6. In the SAR (2.4.6.) it is said:

“To develop programmes of the study field, LA uses marketing and organizational innovations aimed at

- * development of content and form of studies;
- * ensuring research-based study process;
- * improving the quality of studies and research process;
- * development of internationalization.”

It is continued that “Theoretically, product innovations can also be mentioned because future ideas for the study field include development of a professional Bachelor programme the foundation of which will be formed by content based on analytics, upgraded international cooperation in the area of research and methodology”.

The purposes of marketing innovations are explained as follows:

“Marketing innovations serve to improve the LA image, attract new students, increase publicity and competitiveness of the programme. As the example of the best practice should be mentioned annual LA Motivation camp at Saldus St. Gregor’s School.”

What is said is quite theoretical, the only concrete practice mentioned is the Motivation camp. It is more explained in the SAR 2.2.1. It is an innovation. The organisational innovation has been paid a lot of attention to:

“During the reporting period, an LA e-system was formed to increase the effectiveness of the governance process; accountability principles have been introduced in management processes; inclusive governance has been improved to increase the role of students in it.” This seems to be true and is praiseworthy.

As far as the study process is concerned, it is said:

“Many innovations have been created due to circumstances of the reporting period affected by COVID-19. Especially it can be said of the organisation of the study process, implementation of new study methods and ICT solutions. As the most significant innovations should be mentioned the use of Zoom platform for distance studies (also with an option of simultaneous interpreting); differentiated offer of study material; introduction of hybrid studies; organisation of distance examinations; distance consultations, etc.”

This is the case and is praiseworthy. During the assessment visit, the expert group was especially impressed by the e-solutions with the canvas, recording etc.) On the other hand, the visitors remarked that the hybrid practises had been criticized from the pedagogical point of view. The staff admitted that there could be some pedagogical issues with hybrid daily lectures.

In this connection, the SAR refers to the priorities which the LA has set in accordance with Framework for Science, Technological Development, and Innovations 2021-2027:

- development of study programmes and provision of competitiveness;
- improvement of research quality;
- renewal of academic staff and researchers;
- recruitment of students;
- attraction of financing;
- improvement of internal and external communication.

And finally it is said:

“The LA activity is based on principles of transparency, involvement, and equal participation by involving in the LA governance the teaching staff, employees, and students with a purpose to achieve diversity of opinions and find the best solutions through discussions. “

It is not clear why these priorities and principles are mentioned in this connection. They are good and relevant, and innovations are needed for their promotion.

On the whole, it is evident that in the LA, innovations, such as new study methods and ICT solutions, are applied in the study field improving the study process.

On the other hand, like the expert group suggested during the assessment visit, the innovation requires critical mass, and the LA is a small unit. The staff admitted this but said that therefore they have partners. So, even for innovations in the study field, wider cooperation with other institutions is necessary.

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

The research areas correspond to the development goals and are relevant for the study field and for the church needs as well as for certain needs in society. The factual research areas and the research volume with staff, publications and projects are, however, limited in the LA and therefore their offering to the study field is limited. Some key areas of theology are researched, and such a research has a connection to the studies in various levels. The LA maintains international research and study cooperation, but mainly with a very narrow scale of faculties or seminars. This is a risk for both research and study. Some of the projects, conferences and publications seem to be partly scientific, partly ecclesiastical or spiritual. The LA takes measures to help its staff to do scientific research. More increase for the amount and quality of the projects and publications might be found if the scientific cooperation were widened to a larger scale of universities and partners, both in Latvia and internationally. In the SAR, it is paid considerable attention to the students' research activities, especially its financial factor. The students' involvement in projects, conferences and publications would increase when such activities would increase in the LA, which would be possible through broadening national and international scientific cooperation. In the LA, innovations, such as new study methods and ICT solutions, are applied in the study field improving the study process. On the other hand, the innovation requires critical mass, and therefore wider cooperation with other institutions is necessary also when we speak about innovations.

Strengths:

1. Innovations in study methods and ICT solutions
2. Attention to students' research activity

Weaknesses:

1. Ambivalence between scientific and ecclesiastical identity and goals

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 organisation of research activities and its integration within teaching covers the basic requirements. Innovations of study methods and ICT solutions are praiseworthy.

1.5. Cooperation and Internationalisation

Analysis

1.5.1. In accordance with the SAR, LA has a wide network of cooperation in Latvia. Its partners are theologically accredited institutions in Latvia, such as the European Christian Academy, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia, and the Riga Higher Institute of Religious Sciences affiliated with the Lateran Pontifical University (Report 2.5.1., Annex 14: Pielikums Nr.14 Sadarbības partneru saraksts.pdf).

The cooperation primarily involves the exchange of teaching staff, and participation in conferences organized by these institutions also takes place. Long-term exchange of lecturers undoubtedly enhances the quality of programmes, but it also highlights the relatively limited teaching resources in Latvia, including the LA, and the fact that study programmes can only be sustained through collaboration. From the information in the report, it can be inferred that the focus of cooperation is mainly on ensuring the provision of study programmes, but so far, there has been relatively little

collaboration in the field of research, which appears to be a direction that LA plans to pursue. It is evident that in 2022, the LA paid particular attention to strengthening its collaborations by entering into agreements with the aforementioned educational institutions (Annex 14), which is a very positive trend.

As a higher education institution founded and led by the church, LA has a very close connection with one of its primary employers - the church and its founded or affiliated organizations, where church and academy employees are active, such as the Saldus St. Gregor Education Centre, Lutheran Heritage Foundation and the Foundation of Professor Roberts Feldmanis. This collaboration strengthens LA's academic staff's research capacity and publishing opportunities. Collaboration also takes place with local municipalities in organizing joint events. LA's faculty and rector actively cooperate with the Ministry of Justice and the media. The cooperation with other institutions of higher education helps to achieve the aim of the academic bachelor study programme "Theology" to provide the students with an enhanced development of knowledge, skills, and competences in theology. Collaboration with the church can facilitate the development of competencies related to work in the church, which are foreseen in the SAR 3.1.2. However, there is relatively limited collaboration with organizations outside the church, whose goals are not primarily related to the church's interests, in other words, the question of knowledge transfer by LA to the broader society and mutual interaction.

1.5.2. The SAR indicates that LA has close ties with several confessionally Lutheran institutions of higher education outside Latvia (as mentioned in the self-assessment report section 2.5.2: Fort Wayne Concordia Seminary, St. Louis Concordia Seminary, Oberursel Lutheran University of Theology, Lutheran School of Theology in Gothenburg, Pastoral Management Institute, Tallinn Institute of Theology, University of Helsinki).

It is evident that partners are carefully selected based on a specific theological orientation and quality. As indicated, there is an exchange of lecturers with two of them, both Concordia Seminaries, which is also confirmed by Annex No. 9 (Pielikums Nr.9_Macibspeki_pamatinformacija.xlsx), providing general information about lecturers, where two representatives, Timo Laato and Klaus Detlev Schulz, are listed, as well as in SAR 2.4.3. Table 4. Foreign visiting lecturers during the period of 2017-2022, which also reveals the exchange. Statistics of visiting foreign teaching staff is provided in Annex No. 15 Statistical data on the teaching staff and the students from abroad. The report does not disclose that LA lecturers would go on exchange visits to the mentioned institutions; the exchange takes place only in one direction. While there are guest lecturers at LA, there doesn't appear to be a visible engagement of the LA teaching staff in international exchanges. Collaboration with University Theology faculties, except for the University of Helsinki, where two lecturers have obtained their doctorate degrees, is missing. The limited partnerships between confessional theology and university faculties might affect academic diversity and critical thinking within the theological field. It limits research opportunities, interdisciplinary learning, and interfaith dialogue, potentially leading to academic isolation. Additionally, graduates may face restricted career prospects and fewer opportunities for community engagement without access to a broader academic network. Collaboration with University Theology faculties that are closely related to other scientific fields represented at universities - humanities, social, and natural sciences - could promote interaction between confessional theology and current knowledge in various fields and further enhance the academic quality of LA. There is also no report on joint research projects between the partners.

SAR highlights that collaboration achieves the study field's goals: staying current with international research in theology, fostering spiritual values in society through creativity and cooperation, and preparing students for global job opportunities and service to Latvian communities worldwide. It can be agreed that this collaboration makes it possible to ensure the diversity of subjects in the bachelor's programme.

This absence of both student and teaching staff exchanges may pose challenges in achieving certain learning outcomes mentioned in SAR 3.1.2, particularly those related to using modern scientific research methods and developing competencies to connect theology with "current events" and "the experience of society." There is also no indication of cooperation in implementation of common scientific projects on national or international level with other HEI.

1.5.3. As the SAR itself indicates (2.5.3), there is no student exchange in the evaluated academic bachelor study programme "Theology". However, alongside it, the Open Academy operates, where a number of foreign students are enrolled. Further development of LA, the accreditation of this study flow implemented by LA is necessary. Foreign lecturers are attracted with the support of the ELCL and partners, highlighting once again the positive role of the church in LA but also the academy's financial dependence on the church. The LA desire to participate in the Erasmus+ programme is commendable, as it would make student and academic staff exchange more feasible. The absence of a student exchange programme in the "Theology" bachelor's programme restricts students from benefiting fully from exposure to diverse perspectives, cultural experiences, and global competencies that are valuable in this field. Additionally, it limits opportunities for international networking, cooperation, and language skill enhancement.

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

LA demonstrates a well-developed network of collaborations within Latvia and on an international level. This collaboration primarily focuses on the exchange of teaching staff and participation in conferences. However, it highlights the scarcity of teaching resources in Latvia, emphasizing the necessity for cooperative efforts to sustain the study programme. While the emphasis has been on programme provision, there is room for further development in research collaboration, which seems to be a direction the academy is poised to pursue.

Strengths:

1. Collaborative network in Latvia and internationally: LA has established a wide network of collaboration with accredited theological institutions in Latvia, fostering the exchange of teaching staff and joint participation in conferences.
2. Strengthened partnerships in 2022: The academy's initiative to solidify collaborations through formal agreements with educational institutions in 2022 is a positive indication of its commitment to partnership-building.
3. Church Affiliation and Support: LA close connection with the church and affiliated organizations, as well as its collaboration with entities like the Saldus St. Gregor Education Centre, Lutheran Heritage Foundation, and the Foundation of Professor Roberts Feldmanis, enhances research capabilities and publishing opportunities.

Weaknesses:

1. Limited Research Collaboration: The report suggests that there has been relatively little collaboration between higher education institutions and LA in the realm of research, indicating a potential area for growth and development.
2. One-way Exchange of Lecturers: The exchange of lecturers with partner institutions primarily takes place in one direction, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives and experiences.
3. Limited Partnerships with University Faculties of Theology.
4. There is no student exchange in the evaluated academic bachelor study programme "Theology".
5. Limited collaboration with organizations outside the church.

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

LA's collaborative network primarily focuses on staff exchanges and conference participation, highlighting the need for joint efforts due to limited teaching resources. However, the report points out a lack of student exchanges in the evaluated academic bachelor study programme "Theology" and no outgoing staff exchange and limited research collaboration.

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

Analysis

1.6.1. In paragraph 2.6.2 of the SAR, it is stated that all recommendations from the previous accreditation have been implemented. A detailed overview is provided in Annex 18 (Pielikums Nr.18_Rekomendaciju izpildes parskats.pdf) of the report. During the previous accreditation, an expert group recommended the development of a strategic plan based on four main areas of evaluation: quality, resources, sustainability, and cooperation.

The LA has formulated a Development Strategy of LA for 2021-2025 (listed with the link to website in Attachment No. 2- Pielikums Nr.2_Normativo dokumentu saraksts.pdf) and the Development plan for Study Field based on it (Attachment No. 3- Pielikums Nr.3_Studiju virziena attistibas plans.pdf), as well as Research Development Plan (Attachment 4- Pielikums Nr.4_Zinatniskas_petniecibas plans 2022_2023.pdf). Development Strategy for 2021-2025 reveals that the academy has made significant investments in establishing quality management by developing various documents and strategies regulating the academy's operation and enhancing study processes. While the Development Strategy doesn't directly align with the sections suggested by the experts, the goals encompass the requirements laid out by the experts. The Development Strategy defines three strategic priorities and six horizontal action directions, which include as Strategic Priorities -Higher Education Offer, Scientific Research, Lifelong Learning and as Horizontal Action Directions- Quality Assurance, Staff Development, Partnership/Cooperation, Internationalization, Resources, Image/Institution, which corresponds with the requirements of experts.

The Study Direction Plan primarily focuses on improving the academic and scientific quality of study programs but also includes enhancements in the study environment. It outlines the following tasks for the university:

To offer modern, high-quality, and research-based higher education.

To train suitable, competitive theology and religion professionals meeting the current needs of society through cooperation with employers, graduates, and related institutions.

To introduce new study forms and approaches, improve the educational environment and infrastructure, and develop opportunities offered by the Open Academy.

To implement a student attraction policy.

Questionable is that Academy, for the period up to 2025, has defined Lutheran theological anthropology in the context of modern issues as its strategic research direction, while the research areas in the "Theology and Religion" study field are as follows:

General and Latvian Church History

Systematic Theology

Biblical and Exegetical Theology

Practical Theology

It appears that these research areas may not align or at least do not reveal the strategic research

direction.

The Luther Academy Research Development Plan for 2022-2023 (Attachment No. 4) also indicates that the LA has taken its plans seriously, setting measurable goals.

Annex 18 reveals the activities conducted by the LA during the previous strategic period in line with the categories set out by the experts. Some of these activities have been included in the plans developed for the period starting from 2021. However, there is no plan available for the period before that, even though activities from 2017 are mentioned. (During the factual error stage of the report, the expert group was informed that LA had a Development plan 2016-2020, and it was not submitted for evaluation sooner, but due to time constraint experts were unable to thoroughly analyze the previous strategy document and confirm the covered fields).

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

The SAR demonstrates that the academy has diligently addressed the recommendations from the previous accreditation and has taken significant steps to improve various aspects of its operations. The LA commitment to quality, sustainability, and cooperation is evident in its strategic planning and development efforts.

Strengths:

1. Comprehensive Strategic Planning: The university's Long-Term Development Strategy for 2021-2025, which is in line with expert recommendations, clearly addresses crucial areas including quality management, resource allocation, and collaboration.

Weaknesses:

1. No clear strategy in all required fields before 2021 (during the factual error stage of the report, the expert group was informed that LA had a Development plan 2016-2020, and it was not submitted for evaluation sooner, but due to time constraint experts were unable to thoroughly analyze the previous strategy document and confirm the covered fields).

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

There are clear plans starting with the 2021, but before it seems that the recommendations of the experts have not been implemented.

1.7. Recommendations for the Study Field

Short-term recommendations

Establish Academic Personnel Policy and publish criteria of academic staff selection, evaluation and selection of guest lecturers.
Establish a concrete plan for how 1-2 LA staff can teach in partner institutions annually.
Establish a development plan where all requirements from the previous accreditation (2011) are addresses with a timeline to implement.
Setting up a concrete plan for how to include "Credimus" in indexed databases.

LA should increase the numbers of permanent staff.

Consider publishing LA policy documents under a separate section on the website or under "Mission and values", so that it is easier to locate strategic documents.

Long-term recommendations

The LA should establish 1-2 national and international research cooperations with faculties of theology outside the Missouri network.

The LA should develop a new organization plan where there are more visible distinctions between ecclesial and academic leadership of the institution.

The new organization plan should also have a stronger collegial involvement of the academic staff in decisions.

There should be a specific plan with the aim to increase critical reflections in the key courses. The plan should be visibly implemented within 3 years.

LA should increase its number of students with 25% within the next 4 years.

A policy for more publications in international databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science) should be developed.

Acquire Erasmus Charter and organize Erasmus mobilities to establish formal student and staff exchange or find other solutions.

II - "Theology" ASSESSMENT

II - "Theology" ASSESSMENT

2.1. Indicators Describing the Study Programme

Analysis

2.1.1. At the moment academic bachelor study programme "Theology" (ABSP Theology) provides a basic education in the field of Theology and Religion and complies with LA strategic goals and fits within this study field Religion and Theology (study field). The ABSP Theology in the future could be transformed with the addition of a professional standard, therefore giving LA more power to implement practice-based learning in their ABSP Theology. The ABSP Theology was established in compliance with the following European (EQF level) and National regulations (Augstskolu likums, Latvijas evaņģēliski luteriskās Baznīcas likums, Cabinet of Ministers regulation relevant to higher education etc.). As LA describes it in SAR (page 98) - they have an unique perspective to provide an opportunity to implement the study process in close relation with the main employer, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church. The LA is the only theological higher education institution in Latvia whose ABSP Theology qualifies graduates for ordination as clergy and for ministry in the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church as the church does not recognize other theological education. The students are also prepared for work as stewards caring for the cultural environment and sacral heritage of the nation and providing caritative ministry in society.

2.1.2. The title and code of the ABSP Theology indicate its subject area and level, while the degree indicates the level of education it will receive upon completion of the programme. According to Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No. 322 ("Regulations on Latvian education classification") code

43211, which is the undergraduate/bachelor level of studies, this ABSP Theology is classified under Humanities thematic group "Religion and theology" therefore justifying its role in this study field.

The obtainable degree (Bachelor of Humanities in Theology) fits the aims and objectives of the ABSP Theology. Aims and objectives are designed according to the European Qualifications Framework standards to achieve the learning outcomes, which are the knowledge, skills, and competencies that students are expected to acquire during their studies.

The learning outcomes as expected by the European standards and the admission requirements are designed to ensure that students have the necessary background and qualifications to succeed in the ABSP Theology and achieve the intended learning outcomes. All of these elements are interconnected and work together to ensure that the study programme is effective in achieving its goals and preparing students for their future careers.

The duration of the ABSP Theology is 4 years (full time studies) in the amount of 160 CP/240 ECTS, which are in line with national regulatory enactments, but is unusual for an academic study programme which usually consists of a 3 + 2 year model according to Bologna processes.

However LA justifies the necessity to have a 4 years long programme in order to achieve all of the intended outcomes. Additionally, given the fact that they might transform the ABSP Theology and allow students to acquire a qualification could also be a positive sign to currently having a 4 year long programme - after the transition the length would stay the same.

The ABSP Theology is currently only implemented in Latvian and in full time studies, which is also reasonable. After the evaluation LA will consider to license this ABSP Theology for English language as well, which would provide a very good opportunity to include their already existing "Open Academy", which would provide good statistics for internationalization and international cooperation. The experts support this decision as it would mean consolidation of their resources and a consistent approach to both education streams in Latvian and in English as well as a state recognized diploma.

2.1.3. According to LA quality assurance procedures, all of the changes have been discussed in the LA Senate and other LA decision and suggestion bodies. A few changes have been made since the previous evaluation to improve the quality and content of the study programme based on current events in the sector and based on recommendations of involved stakeholders (employers, students, and graduates).

The aim of the ABSP Theology, tasks and achievable outcomes have been improved to match the aims of the study field and LA development strategy. Changes more in detail have been described in SAR (pages 98-100) in Table no. 5. Mutual links between the study programme goal and study course outcomes are evaluated by mapping the study courses.

To ensure ABSP Theology compliance with national regulation, in 2018 LA introduced a course "Civil Protection" (originally 1 CP), which in august 2022 became "Civil, Environmental, and Occupational Protection" (2 CP). The rest of the changes were mostly consolidation of several small courses into a larger course, which can be supported in order to reduce programme fragmentation. Additionally, some courses were classified from free elective and included in the compulsory (A) or limited elective (B) part of the ABSP Theology.

2.1.4. Starting 2012/2013 year, LA has had a stable number of students ~30-35, however this number decreased to around 23-28 currently. Although the student amount is minimal, the representatives of the academy said that the amount of students is enough for economic justification of the programme. It should be noted that most of the applicants for this programme already have at least one education before and the age of LA applicants is dispersed between 26-55 years. Number of graduates varies greatly between the years (e.g. in 2015/16 10 graduates, 2017/18 6 graduates, 2021/22 3 graduates) and it seems to be declining. Almost most of the time, the main reason for exclusion of students are failed exams and study debts.

LA explains the rapid drop of the number of students by the global crisis with covid, the war in Ukraine and economic volatility. There are no dynamics of employment indicators of the graduates provided at the time of the evaluation.

From the social standpoint - since The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (the founder and the main employer) recognizes theology education only from Luther's Academy it makes sense to continue implementation and further development of this education. The majority of students (90 % and more) are male which of course casts doubt on equality in LA, however, the issue lies within the fact that the church allows male graduates to administer at the church. As the experts found out during the visit, this most likely will not change in the near future, however, all stakeholders who met during the visit affirmed that LA allows education for everyone and treats everyone equally. Quoting stakeholders met during the visit "female graduates can devote their work in other aspects for the church". This topic is brought up as well during studies.

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

The ABSP Theology, recognized as the sole path for clergy ordination, is tailored to develop not only theological skills but also stewardship and caritative ministry skills. It complies with the European Qualifications Framework, reinforcing its educational objectives and learning outcomes. Despite a potential drop in student numbers attributed to external factors like global crises, the ABSP Theology maintains its relevance due to the exclusive recognition by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. The commitment to potential programme transformation, including English language licensing, holds promise for internationalization and is supported by experts. Continuous quality enhancements and adaptation, evident from changes and consolidation of courses, aim to align the programme with evolving needs in the sector and stakeholder recommendations.

Strengths:

1. Study programme is designed according to the requirements of this study field. All of the programme parameters are interrelated with each other.

Weaknesses:

1. Low number of students

2.2. The Content of Studies and Implementation Thereof

Analysis

2.2.1. In the SAR (3.2.1) it is said that "Content of the Bachelor study programme "Theology" ((Annex 22)) has been created in accordance with requirements set out in the Law on Higher Education Institutions of the Republic of Latvia ..., as well as LA Regulations on Studies". "Students of the programme receive knowledge, skills, and competences corresponding to Level 6 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)." It is also affirmed that "Descriptions of study courses and final papers have been developed ... in line with requirements of the LA external and internal regulatory documents; content corresponds to the aims of the programme and ensures achievement of the study outcomes, as well as corresponds to the needs of the field and the research trends."

Further: "The study content is created in compliance with the principle of graduality and succession meaning a logical succession of course completion, mutual links between the courses, and equal workload of the students. During the first study year, emphasis is placed on acquisition of introductory courses (Introduction to Theology and Dogmatics; Biblical Overview; Introduction to Scientific Research; Fundamentals of Biblical Hebrew, etc.) which form the basis for successful studies in the following courses. The content of studies provides that almost each study course includes research papers, developing the scientific literacy of students, their argumentation skills,

discussion culture, skills in public speech, skills of analytical criticism, and ability to accept criticism. It purposefully and gradually directs the students towards development of their Bachelor paper which is the main final component of the mandatory part (20 CP).” Concerning the courses, it is also said that “Much attention in content provision is dedicated to intersectoral vision and improvement of transversal competences of students”. This is most relevant for both scientific and societal reasons.

When it comes to the relevance of the ABSP Theology, it is said that “During the reporting period, intentional changes to the aim, objectives, achievable outcomes, and content of the Bachelor study programme were made based on global trends in development of higher education, novelties in the sector, as well as due to respect towards recommendations of students, employers, graduates, and experts. The content of courses has been adapted to ensure research-based studies relevant to innovations in science.”

In the Annex 21 (Pielikums Nr.21_Programmas atbilstiba valsts standartam.pdf) there is ABSP Theology compliance with the national standard, in the Annex 24 Mapping (Pielikums Nr.24_Studiju kursu kartejums.pdf), and in the Annex 23 (Pielikums Nr.23_Studiju kursu apraksti.docx) Description of Courses.

In all of them, the ambivalence between the scientific and the ecclesiastical basis and goals of the courses appears. Both in the Annex 21 and in the 24, there is, among the scientific ones, a competence like this: “Able to find an answer based on the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran tradition in the crises and challenges of contemporary society.”

In the Description of Courses (09 Philosophy and ethics for theologians), it is promised, among other things: “The course provides skills for students to debate theoretically, soundly and logically on issues of philosophy and ethics from Christian positions.” And: “The students will be able to ... building on a Lutheran confessional worldview, develop a reasoned Christian attitude towards philosophy and ethics.” A religious purpose appears also e.g. when so-called Motivation camps are introduced (SAR 2.2.1.): “These camps are organised ... with an objective of not only providing education but to unite in faith...”.

The students may have various motives for studying, but there should not be such religious goals in the academic bachelor study programmes. It seems that the religious goals are present and estimated in the LA also outside the courses. During the assessment visit, the experts’ group got to know that in the cases of those graduates who want to become workers of the Church, the LA gives a recommendation/estimation paper (called Description of the candidacy...; the experts’ group received a paper meant for those who want to become evangelists). In that paper, it is not only dealt with the courses and studies but also with the personality and spiritual capability of the student (“I believe that their (sic) personality meets the requirements of the position as expressed in the Holy Scriptures (especially 1 Timothy 2 and 2 Timothy 3) and the LELB Constitution”). Such a paper would be unthinkable e.g. in the Nordic countries. A scientific institution should not make such an estimation of its students.

In the SAR it is also said that “Historically the Bachelor programme includes also a conditioned system of rituals and traditions stimulating the spiritual belonging to LELB and LA, e.g., beginning classes and other events with a prayer or devotion”. Rituals of beginning lectures with a devotion is not problematic in the same way as the religious goals of the courses themselves, at least if the participation is voluntary.

Training rituals and concrete pastoral work could even be a part of the ABSP Theology. During the assessment visit, some graduates said the pastoral theology course could be more practical. There could be practical periods e.g. in hospitals or prisons, they suggested. It seems that those who want to become pastors would need such a practical training. E.g. in Finland so-called applied practice (partly organized in the parishes, hospitals etc.) is an integral part of theological studies.

The ABSP Theology complies with national regulations and requirements. Its content is relevant and in line with the objectives of the ABSP Theology and ensures the achievement of learning outcomes.

It meets especially the needs of the church. There is, however, certain ambivalence between the scientific and ecclesiastical goals in the ABSP Theology. There is also a certain lack of practical studies in the area of pastoral theology.

Also contemporary theological and ethical discussions might get more attention. The students need to reflect on them and be able to take an independent stand on them without confessional limits.

The possibility to choose courses outside the LA does not seem to get enough room in the ABSP Theology and it does not seem to function sufficiently. Such a possibility is important for modern, multifaceted academic studies.

2.2.3. According to the SAR (3.2.3.), “Mostly lectures are interactive, student-centered, based on research”, and “Such study methods as work in groups, in pairs, and individual work, discussion (planned and structured, as well as spontaneous), a report, a presentation, cinematology, case analysis, creative writing of texts, etc., are all widely used in classes. For certain study courses, a guided tour is used as a learning method (a visit to churches and synagogues; discussions with church members) and a motivation camp.”

It is obvious that the students have an active role in the studying and there are various interactive methods used in the LA, but it is very strongly said that the lectures “mostly” would be student-centered. It is of course a question of how the pedagogical expression “student-centered” is understood. Not all interactive methods are, however, student-centered; there can also be teacher-centered teaching in which students are very active. The teachers of the LA would benefit from pedagogical reflection and education. Could the LA organize such in cooperation with other higher education institutions in Latvia? It remains open how many of the teachers of the LA have got any pedagogical education. Also the expression “based on research” arises questions: “mostly” lectures can hardly be based on research if it is meant research done in the LA. Concerning the relationships between the students and the teachers, it appeared during the assessment visit that a small unit makes it possible that the connections between the students and the staff are direct and easy-going. This is certainly an advantage in the studies.

In the SAR it is stated that “The last semester includes development of a Bachelor paper under the advisory supervision of a scientific supervisor – a specialist in the relevant field. When writing the Bachelor paper, the student shows outcomes of his or her research and the methodology learned during the study process.” It is very good that research is already seen as an integral part of bachelor studies. A challenge in the research training is that quite many of the teachers themselves are still in the process of research education, that is, preparing their PhD. Therefore, it is not clear if the scientific supervisor of the student is “a specialist in the relevant field”. In principle, in the cases of bachelor-level-papers, masters can probably be used as supervisors, although that is not usually the case in universities. It is also said that “The research often results as a report in a scientific conference or an article in a collection of the scientific articles”. During the assessment visit, this was modified by the staff to concern the best papers.

“Verbal, written, and combined study and evaluation methods are used during acquisition of study courses and examinations. --- One or several interim examinations (an examination during acquisition of the study course) and a final examination are provided under each study course. Interim examinations form at least 50% of the total evaluation of the study course.” There are various interim examination alternatives: “a test; performing and defending a creative or practical work (a prepared topic and reading in an auditorium with a following analysis and discussion, and a following reflection appropriate to the learned content); a colloquium; a report; an essay; a practical check of methodology and identification of problems, etc.”. As far as the final exam is concerned, the SAR says: “By means of the final exam students show their knowledge, skills, and competence in accordance with specification and requirements of each study course. A student should be able to discuss the issues and their context, meaning, and practical application mentioned in the course with understanding; able to analyze content and show a meaningful use of methods; able to present

the outcomes of their scientific research; able to think critically, effectively, and to communicate in a tolerant way; able to solve problems of various complexity; able to use acquired knowledge and methods in an independent work of research. In accordance with the specification of the study course, the final exam may take place in various forms: in writing (tests; answers to exam questions), verbally, as an academic research, or a practical research.”

The implementation explained above is methodically in good order and in line with the main objective of the study process which is defined as follows: “The main objective of the study process is to promote development of students’ independent scientific research competences encouraging them to record their achievements in writing scientific articles; therefore, a written scientific research must be developed in almost all study courses.” The “independence” of scientific research on the bachelor level can be questioned; it is, however, important to emphasize the principal independence of all scientific activity.

It is also remarked that “Acquisition of study courses is evaluated based on criteria defined in regulatory documents: the volume and quality of acquired knowledge; acquired skills; acquired competence (LA Regulations on Examinations).”

Elsewhere in the SAR (1.4.6.) it is said, and it appeared during the assessment visit, that there is an advanced e-system with canvas in use in the studies. In the SAR 3.2.3., it was not specified how the methods function in an e-/distance -system.

The study implementation methods contribute to the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study courses and the ABSP Theology. It uses students' activating methods. Lectures are said to be “mostly” student-centered, but this is not particularized, and possible pedagogical challenges of distance-learning are not taken into consideration. A small unit makes it possible that the connections between the students and the staff are direct and easy-going. Some teachers are not yet doctors (mentioned also in the SWOT-analysis) which may be a risk to the high-level academic teaching. Some teachers do not seem to have pedagogical education either.

2.2.6. In the SAR (3.2.6.), it is stated that “In accordance with the profile, aims, and objectives of the Luther Academy, the final papers of the students apply to basic fields of theology: systematic theology, Biblical theology, Church history, practical theology”. Further, “The choice of topic is determined by the topicality of the topic in the field, as well as individual interests of the student. The paper is written in close cooperation with the supervisor by involving other LELB experts as consultants, if necessary”.

As far as the themes are concerned, it is said that “papers dedicated to practical theological topics related to defining Church aims and objectives in the current social and political context” take a significant place, and so do papers on “Latvian Church history and theological heritage of Latvians” as well as papers dealing with “matters of Biblical and systematic theology”. Several works are related to the field of religion psychology, ancient languages, issues relevant to religious workers in the state and social institutions.

Concerning the relevance of the papers, it is affirmed that “In most cases, the results of research are not only informative but also carry a practical application for today’s society in Latvia: both for its part related to Church and others. Works of the students are used both as auxiliary study aids (when teaching their courses, the teaching staff recommend their students to use them) and to form communication of the Church with the part of society which do not link themselves to Church.”

The topics of the final theses correspond to the ABSP Theology and are relevant to the Church and to some extent to the society.

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

The ABSP Theology complies with national regulations and requirements, and its content is relevant and in line with the objectives of the programme. Especially the needs of the church are met. There

is certain ambivalence between the scientific and ecclesiastical goals in the study programme. Practical studies in the area of pastoral theology and also contemporary theological and ethical, global discussions would deserve more attention in the programme, and the possibility to choose courses outside should be more clearly indicated in the programme. The study implementation methods contribute to the achievement of the aims and learning outcomes of the study courses and the ABSP Theology. A small unit makes it possible that the connections between the students and the staff are direct and easy-going. Students activating methods are used. Religious pedagogy (theory and practises) is an area to which the LA could pay more attention. Some teachers are not yet doctors which may be a risk to the academic teaching. Some of them do not have pedagogical education either. The topics of the final theses correspond to the study programme and are relevant to the Church and to the society.

Strengths:

- 1.The ABSP Theology is topical, the courses are in good interconnection with each other and embrace the most relevant areas.
- 2.A small unit makes it possible that the connections between the students and the staff are direct and easy-going.
- 3.Students activating methods are in use.

Weaknesses:

1. Many courses show an ambivalence between an academical and an ecclesiastical
2. Capability (of academic staff) to estimate practices from the pedagogical point of view is limited.
3. The borderline between academia and ecclesia is broken when LA sends to church recommendations about candidates regarding not only their studies.
4. Practical studies as well as modern, mainstream discussions within the European and global theological area need more attention in the ABSP Theology.
5. Possibility to choose courses outside the LA is not functioning sufficiently.

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

NA

2.3. Resources and Provision of the Study Programme

Analysis

2.3.1. The detailed information can be found in sections 2.3.1-2.3.3 of the SAR and in chapter 1.3 of the expert report. The material, technical, and financial provisions for the ABSP Theology are designed to meet specific requirements and conditions for the implementation of the programme. These provisions create the necessary conditions for achieving the learning outcomes and ensure a high-quality study process. During the assessment visit, experts expressed a very good impression of the premises of LA and are confident that all provisions meet the needs of the ABSP Theology. All the necessary rooms for students are very well designed and equipped to meet the needs of students and teaching staff in the study process. During assessment visit discussions with students, experts found that many LA students have a background with a Master's level education from other fields and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Comparing these other HEIs to LA graduates confirms

that the study class requirements in LA are clear and understandable – in some cases, even better than in other institutions.

Graduates of the ABSP Theology are well-versed in theological research topics, and some of them choose to continue their studies at a higher education level.

There is a partnership agreement with Gothenburg Theological Institute where students can go for a master's degree. However, to broaden the spectrum of opportunities, it would be advisable for LA to have more formalized cooperation with other universities that offer a Master's degree in theology.

2.3.3. The detailed information can be found in sections 2.3.1-2.3.3 of the SAR and in chapter 1.3 of the expert report.

Based on the SAR (3.3.3), ABSP Theology is funded through various sources, including tuition fees, LELB financing, targeted donations, and other donations, like partner institution in USA.

These funding sources contribute to the financial provision necessary for the implementation of the ABSP Theology. As understood during the visit, this study programme currently could be self sufficient with funding provided by study fees. But understandably, self-sufficient doesn't necessarily mean that it would be enough for new innovations in the study programme.

LA believes that in order for the ABSP Theology to be cost-effective and provide a qualitative study process, the current number of students paying the fee should be doubled. Additionally, attracting foreign students would be a valuable strategy in achieving cost-effectiveness for the ABSP Theology. Recognizing the significance of increasing the student population, particularly through the attraction of foreign students, LA is committed to aligning this approach with the goal of achieving cost-effectiveness and supporting the overall development of the ABSP Theology.

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

The material, technical, and financial provisions for the ABSP Theology at LA are designed to meet specific requirements and conditions for the implementation of the programme. These provisions ensure a high-quality study process and create the necessary conditions for achieving the learning outcomes.

The necessary rooms for students at LA are well-designed and equipped to meet the needs of students and teaching staff in the study process. Experts visited LA during the assessment visit and got a very good impression of the premises and were convinced that all provisions meet the needs of the ABSP Theology.

Students and graduates are very pleased to have an education in LA.

Partnerships with other institutions that provide opportunities for students to continue their studies at a higher level would be highly beneficial.

Even though the financial aspects are not currently critical, in the future, LA needs to consider attracting more students, both locally and abroad.

Strengths:

1. Clear and Understandable Study Class Requirements
2. Well-Equipped and Designed Facilities

Weaknesses:

1. While the LA graduates have the option to pursue a MA in Theology at Gothenburg Theological Institute, there is a need for the LA to establish formalized cooperation with other universities that offer Master programmes in theology.

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: Fully compliant

The ABSP Theology has been designed with careful consideration of the necessary materials, technical resources, and financial provisions to meet the specific requirements and conditions for its implementation. These provisions have been put in place to create the optimal conditions for achieving the desired learning outcomes and to ensure a high-quality study process.

2.4. Teaching Staff

Analysis

2.4.1. According to the SAR (3.4.1.) there are in total 28 teachers included in the total staff. Among them 6 (Kalme, Rubens, Sildegs, Cakare, Kolms, Graudins) belong to the permanent staff, the rest are guest lectures, national and international. SAR 3.4.1. names Kalme, Rubiens, Sildegs and Kolms Assistant professors and Cakare and Graudins lecturer. The total number of six is one more than the Latvian legal regulations. In the permanent staff, 3 colleagues have a doctoral degree (G. Kalme, U. Sildegs, J. Rubiens).

The competence of the assistant professors, lectures and quest lectures complies with the topic and content of the courses in the ABSP Theology. The Bachelor study programme “Theology” is implemented by 28 teaching staff (13- with a PhD, 15- Masters), and their qualification fully corresponds to requirements of laws and regulations, including Section 55 of the Law on Higher Education Institutions (SAR 3.4.1.). Most of the mandatory topics (Overview of the Bible, Introduction in Theology and Dogmatics, Lutheran Confessions, World religions, History of the Church of Latvia, Church History, Liturgical Studies, Philosophy and ethics for theologians) are taught by members of the permanent staff. In this way the competence of the permanent staff and the main courses correspond in a good way. The rest of the mandatory courses and most of the electives are taught by invited guest lectures. Together, the competence of the total staff and the courses give a good foundation for the ABSP Theology as a whole.

Goals for the learning outcome in the ABSP Theology have been established in Annex 21 (Pielikums Nr.21_Programmas atbilstiba valsts standartam.pdf). Annex 25 (Pielikums Nr.25_Apliecinajums par atbilstibu 55p.pdf) claims that in 2023 5 of the permanent staff will have a PhD. This means that the plan is to add L. Cakare and V. Kolms to the list of doctors. The expert group noted this claim, which was confirmed during the interview session in assessment visit with the teaching staff. The expert group is, however, of the opinion, that LA should allocate more resources and time for research among the permanent staff. In order to increase the recognition of the LA internationally there is a need to give priority to more publications.

Among the main skills provided in the ABSP Theology is “Can explain Christian teaching and life issues comprehensible, engaging and in accordance with people`s interest`s and needs, taking into account current events and the experience of society. In the assessment visit meeting with both employers and graduates there was an unanimous conviction that the ABSP Theology provided just the competence needed especially in the ECLB. Societal needs were, however, less addressed in the different assessment visit meetings. The exceptions were the meetings with the graduates working as chaplains in health care units and in prisons. In these areas it seems that the ABSP Theology and the courses together give a good background. One might, however, expect that the practical skills for the profession of pastor had stronger competence among the teachers and in specific courses.

When asked, some students and graduates would have seen more practical skills taught.

The research situation during the evaluated period is as follows:

Publications of the LA academic staff (here also the guest lecturers are counted as such):

a. Articles

2017: 9 articles, 2018: 4 articles, 2019: 1 article, 2020: 2 articles; 2021: 1 article; 2022: 7 articles.
Total: 24

b. Monographs/books

2017 Sildegs (in English)

2017 Kalme (in Latvian), reissued

It is also said that "Several books by the LA researcher Dr. Juris Rubenis were also published during the reporting period", and then it is given 4 examples.

After that it is referred to the annexes 12 (Pielikums Nr.12_Kvantitativie dati_zinatn_petnieciba_2017-2022.pdf) and 13 (Pielikums Nr.13_Macibspeku publikaciju saraksts.pdf).

It is not clear to the experts' group whether all of the publications mentioned in the SAR (2.4.4.) should be considered as scientific (i.e. Vanags, J. "Was wir der Reformation zu verdanken haben" (Vortrag beim Jubiläumskongress des GHB 3.-5.11.2017)/ im: Vanags, J. Christus allein. Gemeindehilfsbund, 2018, Vanags, J. "God's 'Plan B' The Spiritual Exercises through the Eyes of a Lutheran." The Way, October 2017, pp. 73-81, at least the Journals are not academic, Rubenis, J. Starp divām bezgalībām. Vairāk nekā simts iedarbīgas prakses apziņas paplašināšanai. R.: Zvaigzne ABC, 2021.- 415.lpp). At least most of them can be. It is not indicated whether some of them are peer-reviewed.

2.4.2. According to the SAR a total of 54 teaching staff were involved in teaching the bachelor courses in the years from 2012 to 2022. The SAR also states that 12 among the staff have been working at the LA during the whole period, 7 others exceed more than 5 years. In the assessment visit interviews with staff and management it was underlined that LA permanently acts to increase the competence of their staff and of recruiting new younger staff members in order to substitute professors that leave the LA. Among them are Mg art. Giants Graudins and Mg, theol Laila Cakare. This policy is also part of the Development Plan (Annex 3), 1.10 - 1. 17. LA here shows a good strategic policy for ensuring the continued development of the research competence among the staff. The responsibility for this is located in the Council of Science, the Vice Rector and the LA Board. The board is given the responsibility to secure the financial support for this development.

2.4.4. The analysis in 1.4.4. gives an overview of the number of publications among the permanent staff and the guest lectures. Between 2017 and 2022 the permanent staff published 24 articles. It is not clear for the expert group how many of those were peer-reviewed. The expert group regards, with some exceptions, the publications to be of a scientific level. In addition, there were two monographs published (Kalme and Sildegs, (in English)). A check in the Scopus and Web of Sciences shows that almost none of the publications are indexed there. In the site visit Kalme responded that it was very difficult for a small institution with low resources to publish in international journals, which are needed to be counted in the index system of international databases. The expert group agrees to this statement, to a certain degree. Many of the permanent staff, and the guest lecture, have a respectful number of publications. Most of them are, however, in Latvian journals and difficult to assess for a non-Latvian expert.

From the titles, one can however see many publications with topics most relevant to the study programme and to the content of the mandatory courses. Kalme is a very productive scholar and Sildegs seems to be the one with a promising relation to Helsinki University and a monograph in English.

Based on this analysis, the expert group supports what is already stated in the SWOT analysis (Annex 2) “A collection of scientific articles has not been yet included in internationally quoted databases; “ The expert group also specifically supports the 1.13 in the Development Plan (Annex3). I.13. gives the Council of Sciences the mandate to increase more research for the academic staff. In order to achieve this, more resources and awareness have to be allocated to reach this goal.

2.4.5. The Development plan (Pielikums Nr.3_Studiju virziena attistibas plans.pdf) 1.9. contains an annual meeting organized by the Vice Rector of Studies to organize “measures to improve pedagogical and scientific competences of the teaching staff”. This meeting and the plans for it were also mentioned by both staff members and management representatives in the assessment visit interview. Members of staff also mentioned more running ad hoc meetings among staff in order to ensure quality increase for specific courses. On the other hand, the SWOT analysis (topic Staff) addresses that there are challenges to achieve and realize more substantial cooperation plans for staff members. The SWOT analysis mentioned various, realistic reasons why the LA has some challenges to realize the plan mentioned in the Development plan (Pielikums Nr.3_Studiju virziena attistibas plans.pdf).

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

Conclusions:

The permanent staff and the total staff (guest lectures, visiting lectures etc) publish regularly (and for some: very often). The challenge of the publication policy is that the publications very seldom are in high ranked journals and do not yet count in international databases. There are obvious challenges for small countries and even smaller institutions to get access to such publications channels. And on the level of a ABSP Theology, this is not an absolute requirement. However, in order to increase the competence and ambition of the LA, a policy for more international publications should be developed.

Strengths:

1. The permanent staff has a competence above the requirements of Latvian regulations
2. There are good mechanisms for finding substitutions of professors that leave

Weaknesses:

1. There is a need to strengthen competence in teaching practical skills relevant for ministerial work
2. A plan (with increased financial resources) for a better regulated time for research for staff members must be developed and implemented within 3 years

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 ABSP Theology is implemented by 28 teaching staff (13- with a PhD, 15- Masters), and their qualification fully corresponds to this field.

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

Compliance with State Academic Education Standard of ABSP Theology are available in Annex 21 (Pielikums Nr.21_Programmas atbilstiba valsts standartam.pdf)

The ABSP Theology volume is 160CP of which 77 CP are compulsory part (A), 55 CP are for limited elective study courses (B), 8 CP for the free elective part (C) and 20 CP are devoted to Bachelor thesis.

ABSP Theology structure and number of contact hours complies with Cabinet Regulations no.240.

The ABSP Theology includes obligatory study courses about environmental protection and civil protection ("Civil, environmental and labour protection" -2 CP").

- 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: Not relevant

- 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: Partially compliant

Study course descriptions and study materials are prepared in Latvian, and they satisfy requirements set in Law on Higher Education Institutions. Study course literature (mandatory and suggested) is somewhat not up to date (i.e. New Testament Greek) with newer book and articles in English from recent years (i.e. Dogmatics). Sometimes there is no distinction between independent work and assignments for students (i.e. Lutera raksti). As in 2.2.1 of this report mentioned the courses include blend of academic and religious goals, which could be problematic for academic bachelor programmes (i.e. Philosophy and ethics for theologians). Compliance shown in Annex 23 (Pielikums Nr.23_Studiju kursu apraksti.docx)

- 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: Partially compliant

The diploma issued partially complies with the state legislature and "Procedures by which documents certifying higher Education recognised by the State shall be issued" (Cabinet of Ministers No. 202). Sample of diploma (in Annex 19 (Pielikums Nr.19_Diploma un pielikuma paraugs.7z)) contains incorrectly formatted diploma (first page does not have white background). (During factual errors phase of the report experts admit that the issue with formatting is debatable, because LA uses a company which specializes in Diploma printing, nevertheless experts think that this should be double-checked by AIKA or accreditation committee just in case there is a problem.)

Additionally, diploma supplement has incomplete information about national higher education system (it is suggested to just copy paste the whole 8th chapter from the regulation with 10-point Degree System table, The Placement of Higher Education Certifying Education Documents in the LQF and EQF table and the whole chart (of the whole system) mentioned in the regulation.

- 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: Non-compliant

LA provided annex 25 (Pielikums Nr.25_Apliecinajums par atbilstību 55p.pdf) , but there are no 5 associate professors or professors involved in the study programme implementation together. Instead all of the academic staff (6 permanent staff members) are elected as lecturers/docents, and it does not suffice the requirement set in law.

- 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 Latvian language knowledge for implementing study courses. This is confirmed by a signed Rector's attestation Annex 11 (Pielikums Nr.11_Apliecinajums par valsts val_atbilstību.pdf). This attestation is applied only to the Latvian academic staff members and not guest lecturers.

- 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

Study agreements example in Annex 7 (Pielikums Nr.7_Studiju ligums_paraugs.pdf) include all necessary parts set in legislation (Cabinet of Ministers no. 70 - <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/152072-studiju-liguma-obligati-ietveramie-noteikumi>). Samples of study agreement include general information about the higher education institution, student, study programme (accreditation term, degree to be acquired, length and amount of CP); and the order of financing. Duties and rights are described for both sides. It is advised to include information about guarantees of compensation losses (criteria No. 11 and 12 of this report), so that this

information is easier for the students to acknowledge already from the beginning.

- 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: Fully compliant

LA has cooperation agreement with University of Latvia confirming that in case the implementation of ABSP Theology is terminated, students will be able to continue studies in bachelor study programme "Theology and Religious Studies" (programme code 43221), which belongs to the same study field and provides equal degree to be awarded. LA has also cooperation agreements with Concordia Theological Seminary, Oberursel Lutheran University of Theology. These agreements ensure that in case the implementation of ABSP Theology is terminated, students will have the opportunity to continue their studies in the respective programs of these institutions. As the respective programs at Concordia Seminary and Oberursel Lutheran University are not specified, it is not possible to assess their alignment with the ABSP "Theology" at Luther's Academy.

Annex 5 (Pielikums Nr.5_Ligumi_studentu parejai uz citu augstskolu.7z).

- 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

LA has a rector's signed attestation that confirms it will compensate losses to students if the study programme is not accredited or loses its licence.

Annex 6 (Pielikums Nr.6_Apliecinajums par zaudejumu kompensaciju.pdf)

- 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: Partially compliant

LA has ensured with Rector's attestation that they provide refunds and other study opportunities from partner Universities in case if study programme gets terminated; staff has proficient Latvian language knowledge; study programme fits requirements set in different Cabinet of Ministers rules and study agreement includes all of the necessary information asked in the legislation. However, there is missing information in Diploma supplement and formatting of

Diploma should be checked as well as the issue with elected professors and associate professors should be resolved.

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

The ABSP Theology is recognized as the primary pathway for clergy ordination and is designed to foster not only theological expertise but also stewardship and caritative ministry skills. It aligns with the European Qualifications Framework and maintains its relevance through exclusive recognition by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia. The program has a potential for transformation and internationalization, endorsed by experts, while continuously adapting to meet evolving sector demands and stakeholder feedback.

Strengths:

- 1.The study program is well-aligned with the formal requirements of the field, with interconnected programme parameters.
- 2.Small class size facilitates direct and engaging interactions between students and faculty.
- 3.Effective use of student-engaging teaching methods.
- 4.Largely fulfills legal requirements.

Weaknesses:

- 1.Some courses exhibit a dual focus on academic and ecclesiastical identity.
- 2.Insufficient number of teaching staff with Ph.D. qualifications.
- 3.Limited capacity to assess pedagogical practices.
- 4.Inadequate emphasis on practical studies and contemporary theological discussions.
- 5.Ineffective implementation of the option to choose courses outside the LA.
- 6.No elected professors and associate professors.

Evaluation of the study programme "Theology"

Evaluation of the study programme:

Good

2.6. Recommendations for the Study Programme "Theology"

Short-term recommendations

To the course "Pastoral care" it has to be added a practical application in the pastoral work, e.g. in hospital.
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To make a plan for more incoming and outgoing students.

LA must ensure that permanent staff members are elected according to Law on Higher Education Institution 55 (1):3.
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LA must adjust diploma and diploma supplement according to the legislation.

Revise the process of making recommendations for candidates in order to distinguish better between LA and church.

Long-term recommendations

The LA must implement the development plan (Annex 3) so that all permanent staff get a PhD.
A plan for increased resources (financially and in hours) for permanent staff research must be developed and implemented before 2025.
The LA has to hire experts of (religious) pedagogy to increase competence for all teachers in pedagogical training.
Assess and rewrite all compulsory study courses to make the distinction between critical, academic and confessional goals more transparent. The confessional goals must never hinder the critical, academic goals in the study programme.
Develop and implement plans for cooperation where LA becomes partner in a national MA master programme in theology.

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

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Assessment of the Requirements for the Study Field

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	LA has established regular internal quality assurance procedures, and regular feedback systems for continuous development. The discussions during the assessment visit also evidenced that the LA is aware and willing to develop the quality continuously. The main weakness of the Inner Quality Assurance System of LA, realized by the experts, is the lack of publicly available Quality Policy and Academic personnel policy and regulations on academic staff evaluation and guest lecturer attraction. The power structures between the many collegial bodies remain somewhat hidden, which increases the likelihood for development of an so called "informal organization". The transparency of power structures, especially of economic and recruiting powers, should be enhanced. The core process descriptions are missing and should be created for transparency reasons.

Requirements	Requirement Evaluation		Comment
R2 - Compliance of scientific research and artistic creation with the level of development of scientific research and artistic creation (if applicable)		Partially compliant	The organisation of research activities and its integration within teaching covers the basic requirements. Innovations of study methods and ICT solutions are praiseworthy.
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	LA's collaborative network primarily focuses on staff exchanges and conference participation, highlighting the need for joint efforts due to limited teaching resources. However, the report points out a lack of student exchanges in the evaluated academic bachelor study programme "Theology" and no outgoing staff exchange and limited research collaboration.
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	There are clear plans starting with the 2021, but before it seems that the recommendations of the experts have not been implemented.

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

No.	Study programme	R5	R6	R7	R8	Evaluation of the study programme (excellent, good, average, poor)
1	Theology (43221)	Not relevant	Fully compliant	Fully compliant	Partially compliant	Good

The Dissenting Opinions of the Experts

All experts agree on this report. There are no dissenting comments